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# BULLETIN

OF THE  
RHODE ISLAND LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

VOL. 10

OCTOBER, 1937

No. 1



Green Hall, the new library and administration building at  
Rhode Island State College

## PROGRAM

FALL MEETING OF THE RHODE ISLAND LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Thursday, October 14, 1937

RHODE ISLAND STATE COLLEGE LIBRARY, KINGSTON, R. I.

### Morning Session

9:45 GREETINGS

Raymond G. Bressler, L. L. D., President of R. I. State College

BUSINESS Reports of Committees

PRESENTATION OF STATE LIBRARIAN, Miss Grace M. Sherwood

10:30 "LITERARY FORGERIES OF THE 19th CENTURY"

By Theodore W. Koch, Librarian Northwestern University

11:30 ROUND TABLE CONFERENCES

a. **Relations with the State**—how can we best cooperate?

Miss Grace M. Sherwood, State Librarian, Chairman

b. **The Challenge of Youth**—

Miss Aimee F. Draper, Librarian, Wanskuck Branch, Providence

Public Library, Chairman

c. **Among the New Books**

Miss Ruth C. Coombs, Reader's Advisor, Providence Public

Library, Chairman

1:00 LUNCHEON Served in the College Cafeteria

### Afternoon Session

2:30 BETTER PUBLICITY

Herbert M. Hofford, Ph. B., Assistant Professor of Journalism,

Rhode Island State College

3:30 INSPECTION OF COLLEGE BUILDINGS

4:00 TEA: KINGSTON INN Hospitality Committee will act as Hostesses.

**BULLETIN**  
of the  
**RHODE ISLAND LIBRARY ASSOCIATION**

Published every now and then,  
and designed to be of interest  
to librarians of Rhode Island.

**R. I. L. A. BULLETIN COMMITTEE**

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**Miss Mildred R. Bradbury**  
Providence Public Library  
**Miss Mary McIlwaine**  
Brown University Library

Vol. 10    OCTOBER, 1937    No. 1

**STATE LIBRARIAN**

On August first Miss Grace M. Sherwood became State Librarian and State Record Commissioner to fill the vacancy occasioned by the resignation of Mr. Herbert O. Brigham. Rhode Island librarians are unanimous in their regret over the retirement of Mr. Brigham after thirty-four years of invaluable service to the State. Under his regime the State Library and the Department of Records have been developed to a rare degree of efficiency.

The appointment of Miss Sherwood to succeed Mr. Brigham was well deserved, crowning her thirty years service in the State Library. Her former post of Legislative Reference Deputy goes to Miss Mabel G. Johnson, also on the staff of the State Library for many years.

**GREEN HALL**

Green Hall, the ~~new~~ library and administration building at Rhode Island State College was made possible through a P. W. A. grant from the federal government of more than \$65,000 and a state loan of over \$168,000 which was financed by a bond issue. Ground was broken on October 14, 1935 and the building was ready for occupancy in July, 1937.

It is named Green Hall in honor of Hon. Theodore Francis Green, U. S. Senator from Rhode Island who was governor of the State at the time when the P. W. A. grant was approved. He was instrumental in obtaining the allocation of the federal funds for the large state building program of which the college buildings are a part.

The building is situated apart from the quadrangle of the campus which gives adequate space for broad lawns and landscape development. There are pleasing views from all sides making the location suited for quiet study. Viewed from the exterior it is imposingly constructed of granite, which blends with the other campus buildings. The stone was obtained from quarries at Westerly, R. I. Architecturally well balanced in the shape of a "T" it comprises two stories plus a large basement and attic. Two chimneys, a cupola with clock and weather vane, and the large windows of the reading rooms on the second floor, finish what comprises a dignified and distinctive building.

To Mr. F. Ellis Jackson, architect of the firm of Jackson, Robertson and Adams of Providence goes the major portion of credit for the beauty of the architecture and design. In the main, the building is not only pleasing but also satisfactory for library purposes.

The above is quoted from an article prepared by Mr. F. P. Allen, Librarian of Rhode Island State College, for the Library Journal.

The business meeting of the R. I. Library Association will take place in the Auditorium of the Home Economics Building at the State College. There will be an opportunity for members to see some of the buildings of the college at the close of the afternoon session, and the College Library may be visited throughout the day. Exhibits of interest will be on display in the exhibit cases in the corridors of the Home Economics Building.

A cafeteria luncheon will be served in the College Cafeteria at one o'clock. Tea will be served at Kingston Inn from four to five, and while in the village it will be possible to visit the Kingston Free Library on Kingston Hill.

To Mr. Francis P. Allen, Librarian of the Rhode Island State College, the Library Association is indebted for his cordial cooperation in making possible this meeting at Kingston.

The following two articles are from the informal debate held at the Spring meeting of the R. I. Library Association. In the first the question "Is mediocrity a menace" is propounded by Prof. I. J. Kapstein of Brown University English Department, and the opposite viewpoint is presented by Miss Esther Johnson, librarian in charge of the circulation at the New York Public Library.

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### IS MEDIOCRITY A MENACE?

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Of all public servants, including even teachers, it has always seemed to me that the librarian has the greatest burden to bear, requires more patience and endurance than all others. This is because the librarian, unlike most other public servants, has to meet the public; and the public is not very bracing company, particularly when your relation to the public is that of the servant who knows more than the master. Yet do not think that I have come here to sympathize with you. As it happens, my sympathies lie the other way—with the public, not with you.

But before I explain this last statement, let me offer you a very easy solution of your difficulties. If you would be free of the public, if you would be as un-public as other public servants, and so make your work as easy as theirs, get rid of the public. This is easy to do. You have only to fill your libraries with what Matthew Arnold has called the "best that has been thought and said in the world", with books that the public does not, will not, cannot read—and your difficulties are over. Then day in and day out you will sit in the musty tranquility of your libraries, suffering no drafts from swinging doors, with no stupid questions to answer, with no silly books to buy, handle, or dispense. But you will have ceased then to be librarians—you will be custodians. Your libraries will be vast mausoleums of the dead, ranked shelf upon shelf, stack upon stack, their sepulchral calm broken perhaps once a day by some wandering absent-minded, near-sighted professor, ambling from shelf to shelf and requiring your occasional help to

find books for him on "The Uses of the Subjunctive in Old Assyrian", or on "The Historical Development of the Swiss Navy." And how prideful you will be of your libraries then. You will be able to point to your shelves laden only with the winnowed wisdom of the ages. Upon them will accumulate no longer the chaff that flies from the printing presses today. The works of Goethe will no longer be flanked by the works of Guest; the works of Shakespeare will no longer be sullied by contact with the works of Service; Dostoevsky will not be defiled by Dell, nor Voltaire by Van Dine. In short, you will have a magnificent library, but no longer a public library.

By the very nature of things, and by this I mean the very nature of the public, it is impossible for you to have magnificent libraries. The public won't let you. I know that it is a matter of regret to you that you must spend good money buying bad books, and that you must continually be throwing good money after bad books because the public uses bad books so much and so hard. It is regrettable that for every single copy of a novel by Virginia Woolf you should have to buy four copies of a silly saccharine romance by Temple Bailey. It is regrettable that you cannot always buy what is wise and honest and enduring, because you must buy what is foolish and false and ephemeral. For this, you sigh patiently and say in self-sympathy, perhaps, "We can't help it, we must give the public what it wants." And when you say this, I think you are being unfair to the public. For it is not you who need sympathy, but the public which needs it—sympathy that it hasn't your good taste and discrimination, sympathy that it hasn't your education, sympathy because it has an inner need which only the foolish and the false and the ephemeral can gratify. What I mean by this I shall explain in a moment. First, let me rephrase the statement. "We must give the public what it wants", to say, "We must give the public what it wants because it needs what it wants"—in short, you must give the public what it NEEDS.

I would not for a moment employ the base argument that because you

are servants of the public you must give the public what it wants. You could always reply that the public does not know what it wants, does not know what is good for it, and finally, and most drastically, that if the public won't read better books, then let the public go to the movies. I will not argue so, but I will say that you expect too much of the public. You want the public to read the best that has been thought and said in the world—your ideal, like Matthew Arnold's, is the "perfection of society", but because you, like the school teacher, are bookish people, you, like me, are apt to forget what people are really like. The truth is that the public does not want to read the best that has been thought and said in the world, because the best that has been thought and said is often too painful for the average person to endure. I mean this literally. You want your readers of novels to read not Temple Bailey, Elinor Glyn, Ethel M. Dell, Ursula Parrott, and so on—you want them to read Conrad, Hardy, Galsworthy, Bennett, Lewis, Santayana, Mann, Hamsün, Baroja, Gorki, and so on. And you are right to want them to read these in preference to the others. But these great novelists write about life as it is—write about life in all its twisted complexity, its difficulty, its hardship, its cruelty. You want your readers to understand with Conrad that the noblest thing in life is idealism, but that a man must die to be true to himself and his ideals in this life—I refer you to **Victory**, **Lord Jim**, **Nostromo**. You want them to understand with Hardy that we are the creatures of chance and destiny, that a moment of mischance means a lifetime of suffering—I refer you to **Far from the Madding Crowd**, **Jude the Obscure**, **The Return of the Native**. You want them to understand with Galsworthy something of man's inhumanity to man, and of the gulf that tragically separates not only class from class, but man from his fellow. You feel, perhaps, that if they understand life as it really is, as it has been revealed to them by the best writers of yesterday or today, that they will be the better for it. The effect of great literature, you feel, should be salutary—it should open the readers' eyes to the truth; it should make him realize

in what respects his own life and character and social class are at fault; it should inspire him so, vitalize him so, that he will strive by the power of the ethical imagination to improve himself and his environment for the better. But, unfortunately, what your average reader needs is not a vitamin, but an aspirin. He wants to be soothed, not stimulated. Life has been none too easy for him these past eight years—he has known enough of sorrow, enough of suffering, enough of the grimness of life. And a great many average readers still know these things. In their present condition, a bitter tonic that will eventually set them right is not what they want—not if the tonic is even momentarily going to make their headaches worse. They don't want to be told how sick they are—they know it, and want to forget it. The bitter tonic of Conrad and Hardy is not going to make them feel any better. If anything, Conrad and Hardy will make them feel worse. But O, the soothing aspirin of Zane Grey, of S. S. Van Dine, of Margaret Wildemer, of Alice Duer Miller! In short, you must calm the patient before you can begin to cure him.

All of us weary occasionally of the routine of life, the daily grind at trivial tasks that are of little importance, but which must be got out of the way. Even the best of us, no matter how profound our intellects, no matter how stiff our backbones, must yield occasionally to the irresistible pressure of reality. And so flee from it. As for me, I gobble detective stories. And so do a great many of my colleagues. And so do many of you. The greater the pressure, the greater the need for release. And very few people, very few of your public, have succeeded, during recent years; or today, in escaping completely the heavy responsibilities, the irritating cares of everyday reality. Consequently, while they face them during the day, what is more natural than that they should flee them at night? They want to dream of a simpler world, a happier world, a world of romance and excitement, a world where gay things happen unexpectedly, where adventure and love and beauty come simultaneously, a world where Love Conquers All, where Truth

Crushed to Earth Rises Irresistibly Again, a world where Virtue Is Its Own Reward, a world where there are no depressions, no civil wars, no fascists, no communists, no sit-down strikes, no suffering, no discord, no evil. For bitter reality, they must substitute, for the easing of their troubled spirits, the flabby idealism of the trash that lies so heavy upon your shelves and upon your troubled consciences. I admit that this mediocre accumulation is by any theory of art stultifying and debasing, that it is no better than dope; but I would also argue that it is less harmful dope than the movies, or alcohol. It doesn't make its readers any better, but it doesn't make them any worse. In short, your library may be in theory a temple to art, but in practice it is also a public hospital. Your library will be the temple it should be some day when human cares and human suffering are less, when people have more to eat, and have to work less hard for what they eat, when life is so much easier and pleasanter that people won't seek a cheap substitute for it in cheap books; in short, when the truth of life won't hurt quite so much.

I could stop here, but there are one or two more things I want to say on this matter of mediocrity, and its menace. The mediocrity I admit—the menace I don't deny, but it is my belief that it grows less from year to year. Certainly, a comparison of the best-sellers of a generation ago, and a comparison of today's seems to show not only a more honest and generally superior group of novelists at work, but also—and what is more significant—a superior public. Certainly **It Can't Happen Here** is superior to **Graustark**, **Gone with the Wind** superior to **To Have and To Hold**, **Vein of Iron** to **The Trail of the Lonesome Pine**, **Anthony Adverse** to **Monsieur Beaucaire**. It is consoling to know that many of the best novels of our day are best-sellers in comparison with best-sellers of a generation ago. that were bad novels. It is my belief that this improvement in public taste may, to some extent, coincide with the increase of public libraries in the country in the last forty years. Certainly, it coincides with a growing demand for cul-

ture that is reflected, however mechanically, in our Book of the Month clubs and similar societies. While it is true that a good many people are intent on reading the "right" things as they are on doing the "right" things in order to get on in society generally, nevertheless, culture, even by accident as it were, is better than no culture at all. This growing search for culture should be fostered—and it is the duty of the public library to foster it. Little as I know of public libraries, I know that a great deal is being done in the way of adult education. It seems to me important that this work should be continued. I feel, however, that it must fail if the public library refuses to buy books that are mediocre, and selects only "the best that is said and thought in the world." For it seems to me that before you can hope to get people to read the best books, you must first get them to read. To read anything, so long as they read. Once they have learned to find solace, even joy, in reading, no matter how trivial, how trashy the reading matter, there is hope that they can be guided to better things—to books that will give them truth as well as solace, to books that will give them understanding as well as joy, to books that will give them life as well as a dream of life. I feel that the librarian can guide the taste of the public as well as the teacher can guide the taste of his students. The librarian's is the more difficult task, it must be a slower and lengthier process; but given readers, good readers can be made. You will be given readers to guide only as long as there are readers in your library. And you will get readers only by offering them, to begin with, what is mediocre, even menacingly mediocre. You cannot make an intellectual aristocrat out of nothing—you must make him out of the intellectual democrat. There is good stuff in the American public—it needs guidance and developing, and I, for one, believe that the public librarian, with much patience and much hard work, can help make something fine out of that stuff, provided its librarians are willing to begin from the bottom and work up—in libraries crowded with people, rather than in libraries crowded with books.

I. J. KAPSTEIN

## THE COMMON READER

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In a previous talk, the low estate to which we descend when we speak, write and buy books for the "average man" was suggested. The menace of mediocrity which levels men to an average was considered.

Perhaps this so-called "average man" will bear further scrutiny. He is a creature devised by statisticians and he now threatens to become a Frankenstein. The "average man" is a useful term in life expectancy calculations. A Thomas Chatterton dying at eighteen and a Justice Holmes at ninety-two are of no more weight than any of their less gifted contemporaries. Averages are necessary in life insurance but in the writing of books, plays and motion pictures, the acceptance of a level—rightly called a "dead" level—is destructive and leads to below average writing.

The so-called average man has found expression in three recent books from three countries. Thornton Wilder's **Heaven's My Destination**, portraying a man who frequents libraries in his aspiration to achieve some personal distinction; Fallada's **Little Man, What Now?**—the young German caught in the economic vice, wishing to achieve a good life for himself and his family; and Duhamel's **Salevin**—the French clerk dissatisfied with the mediocrity of his life and trying to gain distinction through saintliness. All of these show the eagerness of men to escape from mediocrity.

For the men and women who use the public libraries, the term the "common reader" is a far better designation than the "average man". Dr. Johnson writes "I rejoice to concur with the common reader, for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning must be generally decided all claim to poetical honors."

It is for this common reader that the bulk of the library books is bought. Is our current common reader spiritually and intellectually of lower estate, is he more impoverished than the common man for whom the Bible was translated into the vulgar tongue, for

whom the Book of Common Prayer was written? Yet the common reader of that day was considered able to stand the impact of greatness expressed with nobility. The common man received the Gospels not translated into the eight hundred words of the Thorndike vocabulary but into the richness of the finest period of the English language. The common man is the one for whom Chaucer wrote in the young English tongue, for whom Shakespeare and Burns and Gray wrote, to whom Lincoln directed the Gettysburg address. But now when there are more literate men than ever before, the diffusion of learning is too often accompanied by its dilution.

We need to keep a sharp distinction between simplicity and mediocrity. The excuse for offering the common reader so much second-rate stuff is that it is simpler. But is it? Elementary books are useful in every field but they should be as reliable in their facts as the more technical ones. Writing in a chummy way about the pretty stars does not bring them within our comprehension but confuses us. A man interested in automobiles, aeroplanes, radio, air conditioning may need an elementary book but he does not want an inaccurate one nor a condescending one.

Does this not hold true of fiction, also? The enduring writers have a simplicity that is without trace of patronage and underrating. An advance in popular taste is indicated in the best seller lists over a period of twenty years, and the emphasis on excellence can be placed as never before. The duplication of good titles and the imagination of the librarian in the use of his materials establish the library in popular regard far more than an underrating of intelligence by the purchase of third-rate stuff. The manual laborer as well as the clerk and the professional man is frequently too busy to waste his time on fiction that is false and improbable, or on non-fiction that is written down. We are prepared for the question, "Do you expect a tired miner to read Marcel Proust or a waitress to enjoy Ezra Pound?" Not often, but it does not surprise us when they do, nor do we expect all lawyers, doctors and teachers

to enjoy them. The interest in those writers is a limited one and their writings are intended for a limited reading public.

Whose are the requests for Lewis and Willa Cather, Dreiser and Thomas Wolfe, Steinbeck and Rolland, Thomas Mann and Undset, Pearl Buck and Hervey Allen, and a myriad others who write penetratingly and well of the current scene? The common reader, the same man who is reading good non-fiction. This common reader may find in the lower order of movies, the drug store books, the pulp magazines his substitutes for the lightest reading. But he cannot find substitutes elsewhere for good fiction and for inspired or well-written and accurate non-fiction, and he comes to the Library for what the Library alone can supply. Why should not librarians help him to avoid mediocrity—and thereby avoid it for ourselves?

ESTHER JOHNSTON

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME.

The village of Kingston which today proudly boasts a very new college library building and a very old free library building has survived a series of appellatives that would have discouraged a place with a less hardy spirit. Originally it was called Kings Towne as an expression of gratitude to the British sovereign for defeating the machinations of neighboring colonies which were trying to get possession of its lands, and it was so incorporated in 1674. Twelve years later, the name changed willy-nilly to Rochester and Rochester it was for three whole years while Sir Edmond Andros was governor of the New England colonies. It reverted to Kingstowne, all in one word, but during the War of Independence tradition has it that Revolutionary soldiers christened it "Little Rest" because they stopped at the foot of the hill for a "little rest". This picturesque name survives in the hearts and on the personal stationery of many of the inhabitants, but the urge for modernity has curtailed the earlier name and established it as Kingston, yet inconsistently branched out into North, South and West Kingstons.

#### KINGSTON FREE LIBRARY

Kingston Free Library, on the main street of the village, is housed in the old Court House, which was used for court sessions from 1776 until the new Court House in West Kingston was built, about 1895. The building was also used for the sessions of the General Assembly, as Kingston, once called Rochester, was in the early days one of Rhode Island's four capitals.

The building originally had a barn roof, and the present roof, as well as the south staircase and vestibule were added at a later date. The court room was upstairs, where a desk and table faced a semi-circle of benches which had spindle backs, and were topped with mahogany. The lower room, now the library, was used for town meetings, and also for social affairs. Some of the panels in this room are strikingly large, one of them measuring 3 feet, 10 inches, by 5 feet, 8 inches, it being a single board. The material for the building was cut in native forests. The frame is of solid oak, the main timbers measuring 14 x 14 inches, and many of the single timbers run the length of the building. The nails that were used were made by hand on the premises. The library is supported by the Kingston Library Association.

#### "How to budget your last \$5.00"

or

#### "A word to the wise, etc."

- \$1.00 R. I. L. A. dues
- 3.00 A. L. A. dues
- 1.00 A. L. A. Section of library work with children.

Signed:

WEST DeROCCO

Membership Committee for  
A. L. A., Section of Library Work with Children.



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