The Historical Sensibility

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Library historians, most of them librarians themselves, bring identity, context, and continuity to librarianship, as well as situating libraries and librarianship in the general stream of history. They do this mainly through exploring historical topics. They can also apply their historical insight directly to contemporary issues and problems and thereby contribute a valuable perspective to the practice of librarianship today.

It's a pleasure to celebrate with you the fiftieth anniversary of LHRT, and I congratulate all who have participated through the years in the very successful effort to promote the scholarly study of library history. Special recognition is due to two good friends and colleagues: Don Davis for his indefatigable work for the cause in so many key ways, and John Cole (and the Center for the Book) for always faithful support.

In stimulating and supporting new historical work LHRT has served as a forum for library historians, a place to find kindred spirits and form good friendships. This has been immensely important. Library historians can feel somewhat intellectually isolated. Mainly professional librarians, they either teach at library schools or work out in the field; few work at history full time. In library schools (or, to be up to date, schools of information studies), unless things have changed, historians will usually be lucky to teach a history of libraries course; at most they cover history in a general backgrounds course or incorporate it into the contemporary subjects they teach. Out in the library field, although historical work is respected, and much more so now than fifty years ago, that's of course not where the action is (about which more later). In the history profession proper, so to speak, we still stand somewhat at the margins, though less so now than earlier.

Still, we librarians continue to do historical research and writing. Why? As many have said, such work can delineate the role of libraries in society, supply the profession with perspective, help build a realistic, critical sense of professional identity and continuity, inculcate professional traditions and culture, point to accomplishments and failings, and so on. That is all quite valid, but it applies to the significance of historical work, not

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why we really do it. In a personal sense it begs the question. We do history because we want to. It's interesting. We love it. We have a historical cast of mind. We're humanists and historians by inclination and training; probably most of us were history majors in college, many did graduate work in history, and almost all did a historical doctoral dissertation. Librarianship has always attracted historians, and there's been a natural affinity between librarians and historians. Whatever else it may be, history is a humanistic discipline that uses the records of human activity and thought. Librarianship has been, and remains, a humanistic endeavor, concerned with preserving and organizing those records and with serving the human need for cultural continuity and intellectual nourishment as well as practical information.

Library historians, with their love for history and their understanding of its winding course, can make a special contribution to the humanistic role of libraries as it is played out today. The fact that we're involved in current professional affairs as well as historical research offers us a unique opportunity. In the intensely practical profession of librarianship to which we are committed and which we also love, the historical sensibility can be very valuable. History is a mode of "thinking in time," as Richard Neustadt and Ernest May put it in their book on "the uses of history for decision-makers."[1] Human beings live in time and through time. Historians explore that experience, and with awareness of all the contradictions and complexities and unknowables that such study presents. History yields context, and those of us who do history can't help but think in contextual terms. We're trained to do so.

Historical perspective powerfully informed classic works on contemporary issues in librarianship—for example, Carleton Joeckel's 1935 study of the government of the American public library, or the post–World War II Public Library Inquiry. Library historians today can enrich current professional discourse by providing similar context, by pointing out both continuums and disjunctions between past and present and by analyzing and assessing, in our time of rapid change, processes of change. This is not a matter of learning lessons from the past, though there are lessons to be drawn. People seldom do so, it seems, or they learn the wrong lessons or the right ones at the wrong times. Nor does "thinking in time" about present issues imply a presentist view of history. Rather, it is the opposite—taking a historical view of the present, seeing where the present stands in the stream of time. It means thinking backward to go forward. I'm not saying that historians/librarians should focus on the present at the expense of their historical research. And I know some of them have addressed contemporary issues from a historical viewpoint. I would encourage more of that. The profession would both welcome and benefit from historians more often applying historical insight and contextual thinking directly to the contemporary situation, not by preaching the value of historical perspective and context but by furnishing it.

I speak, if I may, from personal experience. A few years ago R. Kathleen Molz, my colleague at Columbia University's late School of Library Service (and now on the faculty of the university's School of International and Public Affairs), and I undertook to co-author a book on the current state and prospects of the American public library, very broadly considered, and in terms of both national public policy and local institutional practice. That book, *Civic Space/Cyberspace: The American Public Library in the Information Age,* published in the fall of 1999 by the MIT Press, is an essayistic work, based on various sources: published and unpublished documents and data; field visits around the country; and interviews and conversations with several hundred librarians and others interested in libraries and information policy. We also drew upon our own years of reading, teaching, and professional practice and, very significantly, our historical knowledge and cast of mind. That historical outlook lent to our work a depth of understanding and breadth of scope that, frankly, surprised even us. It helped us, I think, to give a sense of what is similar now to the past and what is different from it and of the problems and opportunities that both the traditional and the new evoke. Even if we had not already had the habit of thinking in time, we would soon have seen that we should cultivate it, for to comprehend what is going on now is impossible without that historical vista.

To take one broad example among many: public libraries today are institutionally and fiscally very diverse at the same time as they are in many ways alike. The classic, fairly simple models of public libraries—independent municipal institutions and a scattering of many small town libraries, plus, later, county libraries in a few rural states—didn't apply across the board in Joeckel's kaleidoscopic picture, and they apply much less so now. The current scene reflects profound changes in American society over the past fifty years and the superimposition on individual library entities of new consolidated and interlibrary systems that grew out of the work of Joeckel, the Public Library Inquiry, and other promoters of universal, equitable access to libraries. Library access is now ubiquitous, and services around the country are quite similar and can transcend, through technology and cooperation, local resources. But this development was neither neat nor consistent nationwide, and all the talk about globalism notwithstanding, services and resources are not equal or equally funded. This is very much because of potent local variations and boundaries that may contradict the regional way we live now but are deeply rooted in history—in how libraries were first formed, their organic connections with home communities, our federal, multitiered governmental system, demographic shifts, public funding systems, and the politics of public policy.

To be more specific: two leading American public library systems, Los Angeles County and King County in Washington state, are both big, successful, and progressive, with annual circulations among the highest in the country. Both systems originated in efforts to serve rural communities that have since evolved into urban, suburban, and exurban components of major metropolitan areas. But Los Angeles County Library has been in big fiscal trouble and has had to be quite entrepreneurial, while King County Library has continued to flourish without much interruption. Los Angeles County Library, dating from 1912, operates in functional buildings in a heterogeneous, populous service area; the somewhat smaller King County Library, established in 1943, serves far-flung, more or less homogeneous, albeit changing communities in many beautiful new or renovated buildings. The Los Angeles system is a creature of the county, and California counties have suffered from the state's economic vicissitudes, antitax measures, and the decline in its historic commitment to educational institutions. King County Library is an independent taxing district in a state with no direct state aid for libraries and in a region still experiencing economic boom times and with many independent districts delivering public services. History . . . Context . . .

The book did divert me to an extent from my historical projects, but I can honestly say that everything I had previously done informed the work on the book and that that work made me think more deeply about historical issues. The traveling and interviews and reading also gave me a wider range of knowledge about the evolution of public libraries. And it was all very inspiring, even to such sharp-eyed critics as Kathleen Molz and I tend to be. We met wonderful people and saw very effective libraries, some operating under difficult conditions. I also have to say that many librarians expressed appreciation for the chance to step back from their everyday work and discuss larger professional and, yes, historical issues with us. For our part, we hope we've contributed toward an understanding of an "old" institution that remains vital in the "new" American life.

Note

1. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).