

ARE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARIES BENEFICIAL?

James Buckham in *The Interior*.

THIS somewhat startling subject was suggested to me by a publisher of books, who said, in the course of a rambling conversation, that the public library was destroying the mental and moral helpfulness that people used to derive from the ownership of books. At first, the remark seemed to be rather desultory and shallow, if not prejudiced; but it stuck in my mind, and the more I thought of it the more suggestive and impressive it became—partly, perhaps, because I felt the force of it in my own case. For ten years or more I have not bought, I dare say, a dozen books, my excuse being that I have access to two of the largest and best-equipped public libraries in the country. I find the resources of these libraries adequate to all my professional needs; and, so far as mental pleasure is concerned, they are inexhaustible sources of entertainment. Yet, when I look at my own slenderly furnished book-shelves, and recall the days when, as a college boy, I used to count it a month's delight to save for, and buy, and devour, and pencil, and re-read some volume of my especial desire, I cannot help feeling that something good and helpful, something morally and intellectually stimulating, has gone out of my life.

Is it not true that there is some ethical significance in the right ownership of books? I say the right ownership, because to possess them as mere chattels, or furniture, or ornaments is neither a moral nor an intellectual benefit. The young person who has a strong desire to make a book his legal property will not exhaust his desire until the book has become his mental and spiritual property also. One of my old teachers used to say that boys are naturally misers, and if they put a penny into a thing, they will be sure to take two pennies' worth of satisfaction out of it. As I look back upon my own experience, I am convinced that this is true, at least, of books. I am willing to confess that I have never got at the real, inmost soul and essence of a book since I quit buying them.

If the public library deprives a person of the real moral helpfulness that comes from the ownership of books, it is, negatively at least, and in so far, a demoralizing institution. Anything that abates moral vigor and vitality is demoralizing. No matter how negative or indirect the influence may be, it counts just as positively on the wrong side.

The idea that the public library might, indirectly, be the means of letting down, though to ever so slight a degree, the moral tone of the community, was the entering

wedge, to my mind, for several other more positive and serious charges.

The first of these charges is based upon a fact which I have often observed in my experience as a confirmed book borrower, namely, that the haste and greed of library patrons to obtain the talked-about book of the hour, and sequester it from others as long as the rules of the institution would allow, is developing a kind of selfishness that is positive, wilful and malignant. It is no uncommon thing for a borrower to obtain the last available library copy of the leading novel of the day, and hold it, either carelessly or purposely, for days after it has been read, although aware that scores of others are eagerly and anxiously awaiting a chance to secure the book.

And the worst of it is that the public library encourages, as well as permits, this kind of selfishness. There is no attempt to prevent the renewal of books in large demand. There is no system by which confirmed offenders in this respect may be identified and deprived of the power to curtail the privileges of others. The indiscriminate, promiscuous way in which books are loaned from a public library is actually a provocation to greed, selfishness, and carelessness. If any reader thinks that I have forced a point in making this charge, let him ask any public librarian whether the proportion of selfish people who use the library seems to increase or decrease, as time goes on, which is tantamount to asking (what would hardly be judicious, of course) whether the proportion of selfish patrons seems to increase or decrease under present methods of library management.

Again, the influence of the public library is distinctly demoralizing, it seems to me, in the licence it affords, to young people especially, of unlimited indulgence in books of light and ephemeral character—chiefly, of course, fiction. Nine-tenths of all the books taken from public libraries, by readers between the ages of 15 and 30, are stories. The very opportunity for so much light reading—which would be obtainable in no other way—is immoral in its effect. It may be objected, and rightly, that it is outside the province and authority of a public library to regulate the reading habits of its patrons. I admit this, of course; but my charge lies back of it, namely, in the fact that the library provides the opportunity for excessive, and therefore mentally and morally debilitating, light reading. The fault lies in the library idea, not the library method. It is wrong in essence to allow young people to have unrestricted access to a great mass of romantic, fictitious reading.

They never would have this licence were it not for the public library. And the absorbing extent to which they avail themselves of it is acknowledged by the majority of parents and teachers. "I can scarcely keep my pupils' minds fixed upon their studies," says a teacher in one of our large cities, "so taken up are they with the fad books of the day, which they draw out of the public library, and pass from hand to hand, devouring them greedily even during study hours."

Aside from the time wasted in this profitless devouring of fiction, the mental and moral enervation of reading to excess that which leaves no real intellectual furnishing is very great. It is like a diet composed solely of liquid stimulants. What little quickening the mind gets is through direct absorption. There is no substance to be digested and gradually assimilated into new and healthful tissue.

Once more, and finally, I am inclined to think that the public library has a demoralizing effect upon the community by reason of the method of reading which it encourages. Anyone who for any length of time patronizes a public library almost invariably falls into the library habit of reading—the superficial, skimming, skipping habit, that incapacitates the mind for really incorporating what it reads, but permits it to gratify a temporary curiosity by tasting a little here and a little there, sipping like a butterfly from every blossom, but never once like the honest bee, getting down into the flower and draining its honey, and rubbing eager thighs in its pollen. The reader of library books never retains any of their vitality. He never really gets hold of them at all. Six months after reading a book, he can scarcely tell you what it was about, much less can he share with you any clear truth or helpful lesson gleaned from it. The library method prohibits marginal pencil notes, and a reader who has no strong desire to jot down his impressions of a book opposite the text cannot be said to have really read the volume. He has simply gone through it "scorching" (in the expressive vernacular of the wheelman) or else wool-gathering.

Now, this superficial, careless, non-appropriative, non-perceptive habit of mind encouraged by the library method of reading has a moral tendency, just like any other habit. It tends to make a person superficial, slipshod, and lacking in thoroughness in other relations of life. The skimmer, the jack-of-all-books, the non-appropriative reader, is apt to be a student lacking in grasp and thoroughness. Whatever his work may be, wrong habits of reading will have a tendency to make him botch it. Habits of mind are apt to spread by the roots, like witch-