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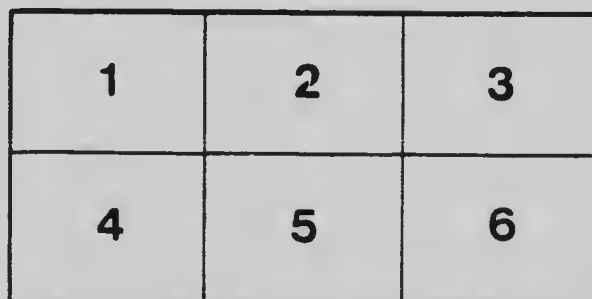
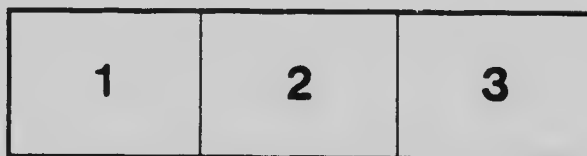
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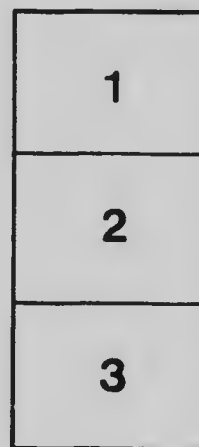
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09736

A PROVINCIAL LIBRARY COMMISSION. *

BY H. H. LANGTON, B.A.,

Librarian, University of Toronto.

THE subject of my address, Library Commissions and what they may do to aid libraries, will probably in one form or another engage our attention a good deal in the future. Dr. Bain has this afternoon reported the ill-success that attended the efforts of the Committee of this Association to persuade the Government to create a Library Commission for the Province, but that attempt may be considered, I hope, only as the first shot, or at most a preliminary skirmish, by no means as final and decisive defeat. The unanimous opinion of this Association was given last year in favour of the establishment of a commission, chiefly with a view to speedy reform of certain abuses in the present method of inspecting and assisting libraries, but also with the ultimate object of putting fresh life into our whole library system. Ontario, by virtue of the character and intelligence of its inhabitants, ought to occupy that advanced position in library matters which has been attained by other countries with no greater advantages in population than we possess. Instead of an advanced position we occupy one well in the rear. The reason is not a lack of money; for the Government distributes annually a large sum, about \$48,000 I believe, to maintain small libraries. The cause of our backwardness is partly the indifference of the public, and partly the present ineffective official inspection and encouragement of libraries. The situation requires a radical change of administration. It is not enough to have the existing abuses reformed or regulations amended; we shall always lag behind at that rate. What is needed is systematic stimulation of public interest in libraries through the efforts of a central authority that shall influence as well as regulate—a body with missionary, not administrative ideals. No ordinary Government department can supply these essentials, and therefore recourse must be had to extraordinary

* Presidential Address by H. H. Langton, B.A., Librarian of the University of Toronto, delivered at the Third Annual Meeting of the Ontario Library Association, April 13th, 1903.

measures and we must demand the establishment of a Library Commission.

A permanent Library Commission is not a new idea, nor is it a theory. It is a recognized and widely established institution in the United States, and the experimental stages of its existence have long been passed. From the experience of that country, so like our own in the conditions of its settlement and growth, we have the advantage of learning what a Library Commission can successfully accomplish. In the United States there are now 21 States possessing permanent Library Commissions, the oldest dating from 1890. During the first tentative period of six years, five States appointed Library Commissions, but since 1895, they have been established at the rate of more than two a year. This steady increase in their number is good evidence that they have been found to work well. Another significant fact is the marked tendency that exists to enlarge the scope of the earliest established commissions, which were originally given more limited power than the later ones. Successive statutes have been passed in some States at frequent intervals, assigning new duties to the commissions. This would not have been done unless the old ones had been satisfactorily performed. We have, therefore, sufficient data in the operations of 21 Library Commissions over periods of from one to thirteen years to enable us to ascertain what a Library Commission for Ontario might be expected to do for libraries. I propose to offer a slight sketch of the work of a Library Commission, every detail of which is taken from the actual record of the more Library Commissions at present existing.

First, as to the constitution of a Library Commission, the policy universally adopted is to limit the membership to five or six, a good working number. Another equally universal practice is to appoint as members persons who are representative of distinct and separate districts. Thus, in Ontario, the eastern end of the Province, between the Ottawa and the St. Lawrence rivers, would have a representative, the western peninsula would also have one. Probably it would be advisable that another should come from New Ontario, so that the commission might have the benefit of his local knowledge of lumber camps and mining camps and of their library needs. For the object of selecting the members from different localities is not senti-

mental, nor propitiatory, but the common-sense, business-like one of bringing as much knowledge of special local conditions and peculiarities as possible to bear upon questions which must be determined in the interests of the most remote settlements as well as of the towns and cities. A third universally accepted principle on which Library Commissions are constituted is that membership therein should be unremunerative. The actual travelling expenses of members, whether to attend meetings of the Commission or in the interests of the Library movement, will be paid, but no allowance is made for time spent on such duties, nor is any salary, however small, attached to the position. The members of a Library Commission are expected to be public-spirited men, enthusiasts if you like, not professional office-holders, and it is tolerably certain that none of the latter would be candidates for membership on such terms. The real working end of the Commission, however, is the secretary, appointed by the Commission, and he receives a salary in addition to his travelling expenses. He will be an enthusiast like the unsalaried members, because he is appointed and supervised by them, and is removable at their pleasure, but he must also be an expert in library administration, and therefore will not be rich enough to give his whole time for nothing. There is no doubt that his whole time will have to be devoted to the duties of his office, because, besides being charged with carrying out all the work of the Commission in the organization of new libraries, circulation of travelling libraries, etc., he will also be assigned the duty of inspecting the State-aided libraries which is now performed by the Superintendent of Public Libraries and Art Schools. Our Commission, we will suppose, is now established, composed of four or five public-spirited men or women, interested in library development, and of a hard-worked secretary who is also experienced in library management.

The functions of a Library Commission remain to be defined. Broadly speaking, they are three in number. First, the Commission must promote the establishment of libraries; second, it must see to the character of the books with which the libraries are stocked; and third, it must help the librarians to administer their libraries to the greatest advantage of the public. In considering the first branch of the Commission's duties—the establishment of libraries—it must be borne in mind that the

modern tendency everywhere is to encourage the growth of free libraries, a tendency with which I for one am entirely in sympathy. Many people, however, whose opinions are entitled to great respect, believe that for certain communities the free library does not work so well as the subscription library. That is a matter which each community must settle for itself. The Library Commission is concerned with the organization and maintenance of free and not free libraries alike. It cannot compel the establishment of a free library where the ratepayers do not want one, but it can help the ratepayers to understand the advantages of a free library, and its influence will undoubtedly be thrown in that direction. The composition of the Commission lends itself to the encouragement of a free library movement, consisting, it will be remembered, of four or five unpaid, public-spirited enthusiasts, representative of different sections of the Province. It is probable, therefore, that through business connections, or otherwise, one or another member of the Commission will be known and have influence in any community in which the establishment of a free library is proposed. An important part in the education of a community up to the point of establishing a library is played by the pamphlet literature prepared and distributed by the Commission. I have several specimens here. Pamphlets such as these distributed in any town where the question of establishing a free library is being seriously considered would have undoubted effect. In proof, let me give statistics for one State taken at random, the State of Wisconsin. When its Library Commission was established in 1895 there were 44 free libraries in the State. After less than four years of activity in "giving advice and counsel to all communities proposing to establish free libraries," to quote the statute defining the duties of the Commission, the number had increased from 44 to 77. I have no statistics at hand for that State later than 1900, or we should doubtless find that the original 44 in 1896 were more than doubled now. The State of Massachusetts has had a Library Commission for 12 years, and their last report shows 351 towns in the State with free libraries, and two without them.

Into the question of the establishment of libraries the organization of travelling libraries naturally enters. A travelling library may be regarded as a sort of missionary enterprise, de-

signed to stimulate as well as gratify a taste for reading, and in many cases would be a preliminary step in the direction of establishing a permanent library. But travelling libraries are also usefully employed to supplement the resources of the smaller permanent libraries. A permanent library that adds 100 volumes a year to its shelves by purchase, might double its usefulness to readers by being allowed by the Library Commission to receive two travelling libraries a year, each of 50 volumes. Some of these travelling libraries might be formed as collections on special subjects such as social questions, history, gardening, etc. The possibilities of travelling libraries indeed are just beginning to be understood. They need not, for instance, be distributed only from a single centre, but the chief town of each county, if it possessed a suitable free library, might be made a sub-centre for circulation of travelling libraries through the smaller settlements of its county. A most thorough investigation of the necessities of the lesser communities in the matter of books would be possible by this means, and economies in the administration of the library system of the Province would result. It is not, however, only small towns and villages, lumber camps and similar communities that would benefit by the organization of a system of travelling libraries. Schools would be entitled to receive special attention. Jails, also, hospitals and charitable "Homes" of various kinds would not be overlooked, and many weary hours, now profitless to the inmates of such institutions, would be lightened and filled with pleasant thoughts. I must not dwell longer on this attractive subject, but pass on to the second branch of the work of a Library Commission, which relates to the books in the Library.

In purchasing books the trustees or librarian of a small library are at a considerable disadvantage because they have not the means of finding out what are the best books of latest date. One of the most obvious duties of a Commission is to prepare and distribute at regular periods a list of new books recommended for purchase. One of the first acts of this Association was to appoint a committee to perform for Ontario this important service, and the second annual list of new books recommended was presented to us by the committee to-day. The committee will no doubt gladly relinquish into the hands of a competent Library Commission the troublesome task that they

have been good enough to undertake for the last two years. But it is one thing to recommend books for purchase, and another to see that they are bought. Fortunately a Library Commission for Ontario would exercise a certain supervision over the purchases of books by small libraries through its distribution of the Government grant. It might insist upon the grant being spent upon books selected from the list which it distributes, it might even buy the books and present them instead of the moneys for them. A list of books recommended for the beginnings of a small library is a useful document that the Commission would probably issue as soon as possible, and many libraries not in their first stages would profit thereby as well. A very important item in the reading matter of many people at the present day is the magazine or periodical, and a good deal of discrimination is required to discover which are the best periodicals in any particular line. The Library Commission would find here a subject for another pamphlet of advice.

There is close connection between the question what books libraries should buy and the official scheme of classification of books in libraries in this Province. Complaint has been made at our meetings that libraries are allowed and even encouraged to classify works of fiction as history, travel, philosophy, and what not, the object being to reduce the apparent percentage of fiction that they possess to the maximum allowed by the regulations. To deprecate the circulation of fiction on the one hand by prescribing a maximum percentage beyond which pains and penalties may be imposed, and on the other to try and conceal its existence by giving it another name, is, to say the least of it, so utterly unintelligent a performance that it is hard to believe that any responsible authority would be guilty of it. Yet there is uncontrovertible proof that this practice has existed and still exists in connection with the inspection of the libraries that receive a provincial subvention. No Library Commission would be capable of such a piece of folly, for a Library Commission would have the welfare of libraries at heart, and this practice seems intended to undermine their credit, and to destroy their usefulness. I have said that it is an unintelligent performance, because it sets up a standard with one hand and pulls it down with the other; but it is far worse than unintelligent. It is dishonest in itself, it lends itself to dishonesty on the part of libra-

ries, and it encourages in readers self-deception in matters intellectual where sincerity and plain dealing are as vital as they are in matters of conduct.

The third division of the work of a Library Commission is the assistance that it can render to librarians themselves. For although a library may be established under the happiest auspices and supplied with the most improving books, its efficiency as a means of educating and catering to the public taste for reading, is dependent upon the man or woman at the head of it. The Secretary of the Library Commission, I have said, should be an expert in library matters, for his advice and assistance will be sought on all matters of library management and he will be prepared to meet the demand. Approved forms of borrowers' tickets, book labels, catalogue cards, and similar apparatus will be distributed by him, and he will be ready to discuss any problem of administration that may arise. Light will often be thrown on unsuspected dark places by occasional circulars or pamphlets on the usual problems. At least one Library Commission issues a quarterly bulletin, each number containing papers on practical questions likely to arise in small libraries. Better than all this assistance by correspondence and printed circular would be the institution of a course of instruction in library work. A summer school with a six or eight weeks term might be held in association with some large library, perhaps the Legislative Library of the Province.

Every detail mentioned in this survey, has, as I said before, its counterpart in the actual work of some Library Commission. But further advances are certain to be made. I have in my hand a list of suggested topics for discussion by the State Library Commissions Section of the American Library Association at the meeting to be held in June next. I will read a few of them that you may see what is in contemplation by some at least of these Commissions:—

“Should Commissions plan for a system of registration and licensing of competent librarians corresponding to similar safeguards against incompetent teachers?”

“Need of travelling librarians and book wagons to supply personal contact with rural readers.”

“Should town libraries have branches in rural districts?”

“Need of travelling libraries for individual students.”

In this sketch of what might be done by a Provincial Library Commission, I have drawn all illustrations from the practice of Library Commissions in the United States, for good reasons. Not only are many of the States, especially those of the middle west, similar to Ontario in the conditions under which they have been peopled, but the whole question of the education of the public by means of free libraries has received greater attention in the United States than in any other country. Nobody can study the admirable methods adopted for popularizing the use of their public libraries without recognizing the efficiency of their system, and the energy and ingenuity of its exponents. But what I think we have to admire and imitate in the American library movement more than any methods or devices is the importance attached to capacity and training in the librarian himself. It is a foible of our friends across the boundary to consider library management a kind of science. I do not think it can properly be called a science. I am not sure even that it is quite correct to speak of it as a profession; but it undoubtedly is a business, and like other businesses, it demands intelligence, some special aptitude and a good deal of special training. The successful librarian, like any other successful business man, is the one who makes his business pay, not in money of course, but in popularity. It is not enough now for a librarian to turn the key in the door at stated hours, to keep a mechanical register of books borrowed, and at intervals go through the mental labour of ordering a new supply. He must do far more for the library, and for the community which the library serves, but he need not be expected to do it by inspiration of genius any more than he would be expected to give sound legal advice without legal education, or to conduct the business of a departmental store without business training. The Americans were quick to recognize the necessity of special education for librarians, and through their State Library Commissions they have been able gradually to enforce a certain standard of training. The benefit to the librarians has re-acted upon the libraries, and the public of course is the ultimate gainer. To produce the same results with us the same causes will be required, and not the least of these causes has been the institution of State Library Commissions.

