From Censorship to Intellectual Freedom to Empowerment:

The Evolution of the Social Responsibility of the American Public Library; A Bibliographical Essay

by Plummer Alston Jones, Jr.

"The great end of life is not knowledge but action."
— Thomas Henry Huxley

To ask the question: "Does the American public library have a social responsibility?" is, of course, rhetorical. Yes, the public library has and has had a social responsibility since the establishment of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1876. Indeed the very word "public" implies both a societal dimension and context. The more appropriate questions in a critical examination of the social responsibility of the public library are: "Is there universal agreement within the library profession on what constitutes social responsibility? Has the library's social responsibility evolved over the years?"

In 1974, just two years shy of the ALA Centennial, Evelyn Geller wrote a provocative *Library Journal* article entitled "Intellectual Freedom: Eternal Principle or Unanticipated Consequence?"[1] The impetus for Geller's research was her fascination as to why ALA found it necessary to frame a Library Bill of Rights in 1939. Geller wanted to know if there were differences in the materials selection practices in American public libraries before and after its promulgation. Thus, while ostensibly tracing the evolution of the concept of intellectual freedom as it pertains to the selection of materials for American public libraries, Geller's article presents in the process an historical and analytical synopsis of how the library profession's concept of social responsibility has changed.

Beginning her quest for answers, Geller turned to the works of library historians for evidence to substantiate her hypothesis that the promulgation of the Library Bill of Rights was a watershed in the history of American librarianship. From Sidney Ditzion's *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* (ALA, 1947), a history of the early years of American librarianship through 1900, Geller learned that the American public library, having started out with an elitist philosophy of service, only gradually became more democratic as its social responsibility began to encompass the entire community.

Libraries, which were supported more or less as alternatives to taverns and the streets, were viewed as institutions preventing crime and social disorganization. Librarians viewed themselves as arbiters of morality with a public trust to keep libraries free of, and their clienteles unexposed to, books deemed improper, immoral, or false. Librarians, who perceived themselves and were perceived by others as being good conservatives sharing the moral values of their trustees, seldom ran into censorship difficulties. Indeed, a vigilant censorship of collections was a duty librarians did not shirk. Censorship before selection and even after the fact was their public trust, their social responsibility.[2]

Geller examined also *Book Selection and Censorship* (University of California Press, 1959), a study of materials selection practices in California public and school libraries by Marjorie Fiske (later, Lowenthal), for further evidence supporting her hypothesis that the philosophy of librarianship embodied in the 1939 Library Bill of Rights represented a direct departure from the philosophy of service described by Ditzion.[3] Fiske noted that in the 1930s libraries took on a "social service" mission, a radical departure toward serving the changing needs of all segments of the community rather than merely imposing elitist values on the few who used libraries. Librarians in urban settings and particularly those serving immigrant clienteles cast their roles after those of the community social workers with whom they often worked hand in hand.[4]

In the aftermath of World War II, Fiske concluded that the increasing level of education of the average American, the call for multicultural materials, and the need for materials at many reading levels worked together to effect the democratization of libraries. In their desire to attract the underserved in their communities, librarians "developed a greater tolerance of what they may formerly have rejected as 'mere trash'."[5]

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For further elucidation of the evolution of the public library's response to the social responsibility of materials selection, Geller turned to the works of Dorothy Broderick and Michael Harris. Broderick in her 1971 *Library Journal* article entitled "Censorship Reevaluated" reckoned that the concept of anti-censorship or intellectual freedom was an abdication rather than an affirmation of professional (read, social) responsibility. According to Broderick, li-

brarians, in adopting a neutral stance in the selection of materials for public libraries, broke their "covenant with the community."[6] Supporting a similar conclusion, Harris's 1973 *Library Journal* article, "The Purpose of the American Public Library: A Revisionist Interpretation of History," posited that public librarians around the turn of the century abdicated their role as moral arbiters by adopting a "passive approach" to library service whereby in the guise of neutrality they could remain uninvolved in social concerns affecting their communities and the country at large.[7]

Geller thus found ample evidence in complementary and even conflicting sources to support her hypothesis that the social responsibility of the library was never static, but dynamic. The social responsibility of the library had evolved from censorship, which did not have a negative connotation in the early years of American librarianship, to intellectual freedom, which is the dynamic today. The Library Bill of Rights heralded not only a new social responsibility for the library but a reversal of its former role. Coincidentally, Geller noted with a tinge of irony that the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee was founded in 1940, one year after the passage of the Library Bill of Rights, to guard against further attempts at censorship of library materials. Furthermore, Geller's conclusion, which not only proved her hypothesis but also answered the question posed in the title of her article, was that libraries assumed the social responsibility of intellectual freedom as the unanticipated consequence of becoming neutral or passive in censorship issues.[8]

The majority of subsequent library literature addressing the social responsibility of the library rests on the implicit assumption that the preservation of intellectual freedom is *the* social responsibility of the library. Along with these articles based on a conservative stance, there are also notable articles either introducing other social responsibilities of libraries or radically reinterpreting the concept of intellectual freedom to encompass not only the materials selection process, but also advocacy of social issues. More precisely, there is decided movement toward the empowerment of public library clienteles to use information to change their social conditions for the better.

In 1975, one year after the appearance of Geller's article, Robert N. Broadus published an editorial entitled "On Librarians' Responsibilities to the Public" in which he reaffirmed that "a continuing problem of society and the individual is the relation of professional experts to the clienteles who finance them." Broadus stated that librarians as professionals must constantly weigh in their selection decisions the merits of demand versus value, but ultimately both should be considered.[9]

During the year of the ALA Centennial, Patricia Glass Schuman edited an anthology of essays entitled *Social Responsibilities and Libraries* (Bowker, 1976). Schuman's essay "Social Responsibility: An Agenda for the Future" was a watershed in which she espoused the view that the social responsibility of libraries included not only selection but action. Schuman saw librarians as "change agents" and lauded as well as encouraged the social-consciousness-raising efforts of the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) founded seven years earlier in 1969. Schuman advocated rhetoric *and* action. For her, intellectual freedom was only part of the library's social responsibility.

> Some librarians felt that intellectual freedom and social responsibility were squarely at variance to each other, without realizing that intellectual freedom is part of social responsibility. Social responsibility proponents were not espousing the suppression of access, but rather the ideal that libraries must work for equality of access for all people, not just say they do.[10]

From this point onward in the library literature on the library's social responsibility, the distinctions among the concepts of censorship, intellectual freedom, and social action begin to blur. By 1980, attorney Howard N. Meyer was editorializing in the *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* that "Neutralism Isn't Neutral." Meyer warned against the misuse of the term "censorship" when applied to the use of selection guidelines to avoid purchasing children's materials which perpetuate sexism and racism. Meyer was not advocating censorship after the fact but in the selection process. Nothwithstanding his wholehearted defense of intellectual freedom, he elaborated that "the word censorship, incessantly applied as a pejorative, was the tool to arouse sentiment against change."[11] Meyer's article combines the value aspect of Broadus' editorial and the action aspect of Schuman's essay.

Shirley Echelman's 1982 address "The Right to Know: The Librarian's Responsibilities" given at the Twenty-first Annual Symposium sponsored by the Rutgers Graduate School of Library and Information Studies was later reprinted in a 1984 anthology entitled *The Right to Information: Legal Questions and Policy Issues* (McFarland, 1984). Echelman covered much of the same territory as Geller's 1974 article and gave an update on what had occurred in the eight-year interim. Rather than seeing intellectual freedom as the library's sole social responsibility, Echelman commented on "the dual role of libraries as agencies of social change ***and*** [emphasis added] intellectual freedom." Echelman's reasoning echoed Schuman's in her view that intellectual freedom without advocacy of social action and willingness to change are unacceptable.[12]

Incorporating Echelman's reasoning, articles throughout the 1980s and 1990s which addressed the library's social responsibility implied the need for the advocacy of social change — gradual, constant, and, if necessary, even radical. Svea Gold's 1988 *American Libraries* article on child abuse presented ways that libarians could help prevent this societal problem.[13] An article published that same year by Sandy Berman asked the provocative question, "Why Should Librarians Give a Damn?" Berman's answer to his own question was in effect a no less provocative plea for librarians to support change actively by providing alternative sources of information: "If we truly give a damn and start to behave *pro*-actively, it just *could* make a difference. If we don't the trend toward stifling conformity and regimentation will only worsen."[14]

By the 1990s ALA had demonstrated its advocacy in the political arena as well as the social. Zoia Horn's 1990 *Library Journal* article urged fellow librarians to continue the boycott of South Africa until "the *free* flow of information is a reality."[15] A *Library Journal* news items on the Iraq Conflict that same year warned that "librarians must again face the wartime issues of free information flow and the profession's moral stand."[16] 1990 also saw the birth of the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) which seeks among several goals and initiatives "to provide a forum for the open exchange of radical views on library issues, to support activist librarians as they work to effect changes in their own libraries and communities, [and] to monitor the professional ethics of librarianship from a 'social responsibility' perspective."[17]

In a 1991 issue of *Library Journal* Terry Link presented a guide for "socially responsible investing" entitled "Do the Right Thing: Are You Putting Your Money Where Your Heart Is?"[18] Link's article is interesting in that with it and other articles like it the profession would seem at first glance to have come full circle back to the value-laden judgmental mindset of librarians before 1939. But there is a significant twist here. The attempt is to include, not exclude, citizens in making the vital decisions which will affect in a socially responsible way the lives of all Americans.

It is apparent that librarians are beginning to lose their reluctance to get involved in social and political issues "that do not

involve libraries per se" or "do not obviously bear a direct relationship to librarianship."[19] Librarians are only just beginning to empower themselves, but this self-empowerment is the necessary first step toward empowering others. The library profession has moved in a century and a quarter from a mindset of censorship to a defense of intellectual freedom, and, ultimately, to the beginnings of empowerment. Still, we have a long way to go.

Perhaps the public library's responsibility lurks somewhere within the question of a British librarian, Peter Jordan, who asked as early as 1975: "If libraries do not exist ultimately to improve the quality of life, what do they exist for?"[20] Or, to bring the matter closer to home, Marilyn Miller, a North Carolina library educator, affirms the existence of ***two***, not one, social responsiblities of public libraries.

In January 1993, during her tenure as ALA President, Miller addressed and offered support and encouragement to ALA members who were demonstrating at the Midwinter Conference in Denver in protest against the anti-gay and lesbian legislation passed in Colorado. Miller proclaimed unequivocably that "ALA has a long tradition of supporting human rights and intellectual freedom."[21]

May the American library profession continue to examine and refine our tradition of social responsibility and through the American public library evolve toward the empowerment of all.

References

[1] Evelyn Geller, "Intellectual Freedom: Eternal Principle or Unanticipated Consequence?," *Library Journal* 99 (15 May 1974): 1364-67.

[2] Sidney Herbert Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture; A Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States from 1850 to 1900* (Chicago: ALA, 1947), cited in Geller, "Intellectual Freedom," 1365-66.

[3] Marjorie (Fiske) Lowenthal, *Book Selection and Censorship; A Study of School and Public Libraries in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), cited in Geller, "Intellectual Freedom," 1366.

[4] Plummer Alston Jones, Jr., "American Public Library Service to the Immigrant Community, 1876-1948; A Biographical History of the Movement and Its Leaders: Jane Maud Campbell (1869-1947), John Foster Carr (1869-1939), Eleanor (Edwards) Ledbetter (1870-1954), and Edna Phillips (1890-1968)," PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1991. See especially Chapter VI: The Librarian as Social Worker: Eleanor (Edwards) Ledbetter, 1870-1954, 361-428 passim.

[5] Lowenthal, *Book Selection and Censorship*, quoted in Geller, "Intellectual Freedom," 1366.

[6] Dorothy M. Broderick, "Censorship Reevaluated," *Library Journal* 96 (15 Nov. 1971): 3816-18, quoted in Geller, "Intellectual Freedom," 1367.

[7] Michael H. Harris, "The Purpose of the American Public Library: A Revisionist Interpretation of History," *Library Journal* 98 (15 Sept. 1973): 2509-14, cited in Geller, "Intellectual Freedom," 1366-67.

[8] As an interesting aside, Geller, a doctoral student at the time her article was published, later expounded upon her findings in her dissertation (Columbia University, 1980) and later her monograph (Greenwood Press, 1984). See, Evelyn Geller, "Ideals and Ideology: The Freedom to Read in American Public Libraries, 1876-1939," PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1980; and *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876-1939: A Study in Cultural Change* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984).

[9] R. N. Broadus, "On Librarians' Responsibilities to the Public," *Catholic Library World* 47 (Nov. 1975): 182-84, quote is on page 182.

[10] Patricia Glass Schuman, "Social Responsibility: An Agenda for the Future," in *Social Responsibilities and Libraries; A Library Journal/School Library Journal Selection*, comp. and ed. by Patricia Glass Schuman (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1976), 369-77, quote is on pages 370-71.

[11] H. N. Meyer, "Constitutional Responsibilities of Librarians: Neutralism Isn't Neutral," *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* 11, no. 6 (1980): 12-13, quote is on page 13.

[12] Shirley Echelman, "The Right to Know: The Librarian's Responsibilities," in *The Right to Information*, ed. by Jana Varlejs (Jefferson City, NC: McFarland, 1984), 54-69, quote is on page 56.

[13] Svea Gold, "Child Abuse: The Librarian's Role," *American Libraries* (Feb. 1988): 104+.

[14] Sandy Berman, "Why Should Librarians Give a Damn?" *Collection Building* 9, no. 1 (1988): 41-42, quote is on page 42.

[15] Zoia Horn, "Boycotting South Africa: ALA at the Crossroads," *Library Journal* 115 (15 June 1990): 38-41, quote is on page 41.

[16] "Iraq Conflict Creates Library Concerns; As Desert Shield Turns to Desert Sword, Librarians Must Again Face the Wartime Issues of Free Information Flow and the Profession's Moral Stand," *Library Journal* 115 (Dec. 1990): 18-19, quote is on page 18.

[17] "Progressives Meet at ALA Midwinter; New Group Embraces Socially Responsible and Ethical Perspectives," *Library Journal* 115 (15 Feb. 1990): 116.

[18] Terry Link, "Do the Right Thing: Are You Putting Your Money Where Your Heart Is?" *Library Journal* 116 (1 Nov. 1991): 57-60.

[19] Debra Stevens, "Social Responsibility and Librarianship: A Dilemma of Professionalism," *Canadian Library Journal* 46 (Feb. 1989): 17-22, quote is on page 17.

[20] Peter Jordan, "Librarians and Social Commitment," *Assistant Librarian* 68 (Apr. 1975): 62-66, quote is on page 62.

[21] "Midwinter by the Numbers; Important Issues and Events of ALA's Denver Meeting Came with Call Numbers," *American Libraries* 24 (March 1993): 222-30, 259-65, quote is on page 222.