

# ASBURY PARK CONFERENCE

JUNE 26—JULY 1, 1916

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS: THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH  
BY MARY WRIGHT PLUMMER, *Principal, Library School of the New York Public Library*

It would seem impossible in a year such as the past year has been with its over-turnings and upheavals, not only of material things but of ideals and of what had seemed moral certainties, that we should spend the time of our annual meeting in the discussion of small or esoteric questions. These crises in life show us the littleness of little things, the subserviency of technique; make us feel through the pull of events our connection with the rest of the world, and even with the universe; take us out of our professional selves and make us conscious of more inclusive selves. And they make us see, as perhaps even we have not seen before, that our profession has a not insignificant part to play in world matters. Hence we have chosen as our general theme for the conference, "THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND DEMOCRACY."

Whichever theory we may hold of the constitution of this world of men, whether we believe that the actions of man are the results of free-will or are determined for him by powers and causes over which he has no control, civilization is based practically on the former doctrine. The game has rules, we say, but within the rules man is free. If this were not the consensus of opinion, why laws and ordinances, and punishment or rewards? Why praise or blame, renown or ignominy? Why take anyone to task for what he cannot help doing or saying? Why bestow the laurel or even the martyr's palm, when owing to the unknown forces of the past and present, the victor or the martyr could not have chosen otherwise than to do as he did? If the test of a doctrine's truth or value is that it "works," as our great pragmatist

has expressed it, then we must accept the doctrine of free-will as our working basis until we find something better that also works. In other words, we are given as guide-posts, general principles arrived at by the accumulated experience and wisdom of mankind; as a goal, many of us would still say, the Kingdom of Heaven on earth; as a motive power, a certain constraint to go forward toward this goal, felt more strongly by some than by others, consciously felt perhaps by few, absolutely ignored by almost no one. With these indications we are given the liberty to govern ourselves, be the arrival at the goal early or late, the journey steady or interrupted or marked by retrogressions. No compulsion is used, except that constant, mostly unrealized constraint; no punishment, except natural and inevitable consequences, follows the breaking of the rules.

What is this but the method after which democracy strives? A long way after, let it be granted. Still it moves and it faces that way, toward the goal of individual self-government by way of collective self-government. Doubtless, if we gave the enlightened few full sway, many things would be better done, better understood; *but* the things that such sway would take away are greater than the things it would give. Outer peace and harmony and efficiency do not mean inner conditions of the same kind necessarily, and if they are forced upon us they generally mean quite the contrary.

Doubts of democracy, its value as compared with the values of other forms of government, bitter criticisms of its weaknesses, disbelief in the final accomplishments of its stated ends, are so commonly

[NOTE: As the final proofs of these papers of the Asbury Park Conference are passing through the editor's hands, the sad tidings are received of the death, on September twenty-first, of our honored president of the year,—Mary Wright Plummer.—EDITOR.]

heard all about us that only a rooted faith that knows its reasons, is sure of standing against the tide.

The believer in and the promoter of democracy in these days has need of a great patience, a firm conviction, a balanced mind. He needs to remember that the faults of democracy are the faults of human nature itself, and that for what all have done or helped to get done or hindered being done, all bear the consequences; while the faults of other forms of control are the faults of human nature plus those engendered by undue power or monopoly, and *all* abide by the results of what the *few* have done. We can correct our own mistakes, retrace our own missteps, but when they are the mistakes and missteps of others who have power over us, where is our remedy?

Out of democracy may evolve something greater and better than we have yet visioned, but as one watches the human tides all over the world, the rising of classes once submerged, the awakening of nations once slumbering or stupefied under an absolute sway of some kind, the call of the women of all civilized countries to be pressed into service, it is fair to believe that for years to come more democracy rather than less is the next number on the program, the next phase through which we must work to our goal. There are faults inherent in democracy; granted. We are beginning to see this, which is the first step toward correction. We are no longer satisfied with theoretical democracy; it must be applied; and if the theory does not work, so much the worse for the theory, for we begin to see that by the fruits of a democracy we are to know if it is real democracy.

The consciousness of power to improve, to amend what is wrong, is a great asset for any worker with vision. The knowledge that a great mass of uninterested, or unintelligent, or hazy-minded persons are to be waked up, stimulated, focused, means that those having this knowledge are incited to keep everlastingly at it. The certainty that the world cannot go back, that there is no golden age to go back to

and never was, that there is an inner urge which all obey consciously or unconsciously, which is bound to bring us all out into some better place if it is wisely guided; this certainty is an impelling force that cannot be resisted. One may step aside out of the movement and take refuge in a corner and call names at those who go forward, or turn one's back and take no further interest in the subsequent proceedings, and so may save one's own remaining years from disturbance, perhaps, but it is useless to stand in the road and try to stem the tide, that is, useless in the long run. There are and there will be obstructions, but when the dam breaks the cumulated movement will be all the greater and swifter and more damage will be done.

The great dangers of a democracy are ignorance and fear; the fear born of the ignorance. When, as children, we have learned that there is no such thing as the bogey we have been threatened with, we no longer fear it, and as we grow older and successive bogies are presented by those who, like the nurse or the unwise parent, would frighten us into doing their will, it is only intelligence, it is only the knowing and the power to think and reason that can divest us of successive fears. The majority of us are very bold in proclaiming our ideals, but when in order to reach desirable things we find we must go through phases and periods of disorder and confusion and even danger, we back down, appalled by the bogies which our opponents assure us are permanent evils and not necessarily incidents of progress. To get *to* things, we must go *through* things, and the real democrat is he who is not dismayed, who even if shocked or disappointed realizes that he is meeting the phantasms that stand threatening before every stronghold of reaction to be taken and before every goal of progress to be reached.

What has all this to do with LIBRARIES? This: that free-will to choose must be based upon a knowledge of good and evil; access to all the factors for making choices must be free to the people of a democracy which can flourish and develop

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and improve only as it continues to make wise choices. The FREE LIBRARY is one of the few places where education and wisdom can be obtained for preparation in the *making of choices*.

We speak of the *pursuit* of truth. The phrase is an unhappy one, suggesting the picture of truth fleeing before pursuers as the hare before the hounds, with the implication that when caught she also will be killed. The search for truth is better, though even that seems to imply that truth hides. It is hard, indeed, to find a phrase to describe the work of the seekers of truth. There are, however, truths that are hidden; there are also truths that seem to flee as we approach, and it is, perhaps, truths rather than truth concerning which I should speak, and truths relative rather than truth absolute, for to Pilate's question, "What is truth?" there has been no answer but its echo. If truth could be condensed into a formula, a statement, or an assertion, we should all be able to have it and pursuit might cease with damaging results, for it is in the search that we gain "mightier powers for manlier use." Truths, however, may advantageously be found, for beyond each one lies another temptingly obscured, that incites further search. May it be possible that absolute truth is a composite, the sum of myriads of smaller or larger truths which may to some extent be compassed to the great advantage of mankind?

There have been, it is true, discoveries that have had to be set aside as knowledge grew and proved them only semblances; a fact that should tend to make all students humble and open-minded. Yet if the law of gravitation is not a law and the Darwinian theory is to be disproved, we are but set free for further study of the meaning of the phenomena on which these were based, and the universe does not become less interesting. Physical truths, the truths of the laboratory, are but one class of those that closely concern the human race. There are economic truths, intellectual truths, aesthetic truths, spiritual truths to be sought. For the finding of

these, observation, reflection, and concentration of thought are needed, but also a knowledge of truths previously found, of the reasoning previously employed, of facts already ascertained, of untruths set aside and discarded. And at this point, the library becomes the resource of all seekers after truth. Granted, that a large percentage of those who read in libraries are not so much seeking truth for itself as for their own advantage; yet, however or by whomever found, a truth is a truth and is bound to advantage the world sooner or later, if only as a point of departure. Indeed, this is the best use to which to put all truth, and so the seeker continues to seek and inspire others to seek.

We know that important physical laws have been deduced and valuable powers secured to mankind, from the chance observation of some apparently unimportant fact, but we do not know how many times a reader has been put on the trail of a truth by some sentence in a book, around which shone to him a light invisible to others, nor how often the written word has produced the tense emotion in which great living truths are sensed and absorbed once and for all.

If the librarian could know, could not only know but realize, the power that is going forth from the books over which so many heads are bent, or which he gives out to be taken home, I know not whether he would be puffed up with pride, or stunned with his responsibility. If he knew the paths of discovery, the inspired response to inspired words, the impulse toward or away from truth or truths, for which his books are accountable, would he have the strength to hold his hand, saying, "With the search for truth I must not interfere? Whatever my beliefs, whatever my convictions, whatever my apprehensions, I must have confidence in truth's power to take care of itself. I must trust the truth to make its own way." Perhaps it is fortunate for truth that the librarian does not know the effects of his books and what is going on in the minds and hearts of their readers, for in every generation fear and distrust of

the mental and spiritual processes of others are the drags on the wheels of the chariot that sets out in pursuit of truth.

The parent who cannot realize that the time has come for his child to walk alone and "dree its ain weird," the teacher or preacher who does not recognize that his audience is ready for the undisguised truth as he can give it to them, the censor who suppresses facts that he considers inflammatory, the ruler who stamps out in his dominion unwelcome truths that are quickly contagious, are all saying in one way or another, "Truth must be protected; I will protect her by concealing what seem to me dangerous paths of thought, and I am the judge as to what is true and what is safe."

Truth is expansive and explosive. Where it cannot make its way gradually and gently, it comes with the roar and the force of revolution. Every social class buttressed by distrust of the class above or below, acting with closed mind, refusing to let truth penetrate by the smallest chink, may look to see some day its fortifications flying upward in pieces, through the underground workings of the great explosive. If but one way is left open, the catastrophe may be avoided. Shall the public library be that way?

To all appearances and by their own confession, the churches have failed so long to trust the truth and the people, that now when they do trust they find themselves mistrusted, and it is only slowly and with infinite pains that they are building up again their congregations on a basis of sincerity and trust.

The schools of higher learning are now on trial, and the people are asking if and why plain truths or facts cannot be spoken in some of them. The press vacillates between suppression and over-emphasis, and we know beforehand which side a journal will take in a controversy and suspect the argument that has led to its choice. Governments professedly based upon fundamental truths deny those truths by their actions.

So far the American people have trusted

the public library because more and more the public library has trusted the people. Where truths are being debated, no matter how strenuously, the people know that the library will give them both sides, that they may have all the material for a decision. On the shelves are the books and other records to disprove the misleading figures of one side or the other. If new scientific discoveries seem to connote changes in moral or religious belief, they must be met by new moral or religious discoveries, not by denials unsupported or refusals to consider or the suppression of the discovery. It is entirely possible, if we keep cool, that we may find the connotation to be only seeming.

Few librarians are entirely free in their movements when it comes to the choice of books. There may be a distrustful or prejudiced board member trying to exercise a biased censorship; there may be a timid member afraid of a one-sided community, and books may have to be withdrawn as a sop to popular prejudice by order of the board. Whether or not there is really anything untrue in the book, it can safely be left to profit by the advertisement it gets in the contest,—it is the library that loses, for some people begin to mistrust an institution that is afraid of a book, for a book cannot really and permanently damage truth. Even a temporary and seeming damage brings out at once the defenders of the other side and puts the question again to the forum. Most librarians have at some time or other been requested to withdraw certain books because of their untruth, but investigation of the books will almost invariably show that they have not attacked truth, but an institution. Much more to be dreaded than open assault upon the library's buying of books is the interpenetration of a public library's policy by insidious and gradual changes in its personnel, or in its rules, or in its guiding factors. Those who wish all argument for and against to have a fair field, need to be everlastingly vigilant to keep the umpire's mind and to have courage. "Nothing is lost that has not

been yielded, and if it is right, it will have the opening and ending endan

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been yielded up," the German saying has it, and if the library will not give up its right, it cannot lose it; but it must also have the intelligence to know what is happening and where and how its right is being endangered.

Perhaps since the foundation of the world, ours is the first generation to demand facts, to be willing, in the main, to face facts however disconcerting, however disappointing, however shocking. All over the world men and women are refusing to live longer in a fool's paradise. "Let us hear the whole," is the cry; "let us know our real situation, so that we may make it better, so that we may no longer build on a false foundation," and there is no doubt that some terrible things are coming to light through the drama, through the novel, through the new contact between class and class, even through the falling out of thieves. We can no longer turn our backs on these in the Victorian manner, covering up the glimpses we have had and making believe we have seen noth-

ing, or putting a touch of legal salve upon a visible sore spot; too much has been shown of all conditions; we must learn the facts, whoever or whatever is thereby discredited.

The schools give the citizen his tool, the ability to read, the free library and the press, the stage and the moving picture, and life itself give him his material for thought. Might the first four agencies combine to uphold the liberty of the adult citizen to know what concerns him and not what it is judged best he should know by those who have interests to serve, however worthy these interests may seem, we should have the prime requisite for an enlightened democracy capable of infinite development.

The spirit of truth itself seems to be abroad in the world, speaking through manifold and different voices, and through the printed word. Is it not a wonderful grace that is offered to the public library, the opportunity to be and to continue truth's handmaid?

#### HOW THE COMMUNITY EDUCATES ITSELF

BY ARTHUR E. BOSTWICK, *Librarian, St. Louis Public Library*

In endeavoring to distinguish between self-education and education by others, one meets with considerable difficulty. If a boy reads Mill's "Political economy" he is surely educating himself, but if after reading each chapter he visits a class and answers certain questions propounded for the purpose of ascertaining whether he has read it at all, or has read it understandingly, then we are accustomed to transfer the credit for the educative process to the questioner, and say that the boy has been educated at school or college. As a matter of fact I think most of us are self-educated. Not only is most of what an adult knows and can do, acquired outside of school, but in most of what he learned even there he was self-taught. His so-called teachers assigned tasks to him and saw

that he performed them. If he did not, they subjected him to discipline. Once or twice in a lifetime most of us have run up against a real teacher—a man or a woman that really played a major part in shaping our minds as they now are—our stock of knowledge, our ways of thought, our methods of doing things. These men have stood, and are still standing, though they may have joined the great majority long ago, athwart the stream of sensation as it passes through us, and are determining what part shall be stored up, and where; what kind of action shall ultimately result from it. The influence of a good teacher spreads farther and lasts longer than that of any other man. If his words have been recorded in books it may reach across the seas and down the ages.