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*The Librarian in Relation
to Books*

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READ BEFORE THE
LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
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THE LIBRARIAN IN RELATION TO BOOKS.

BY HENRY R. TEDDER, SECRETARY AND LIBRARIAN OF
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WHEN I come to these meetings year after year I invariably listen with great respect to my younger brethren, so full of energy and zeal, so eager and brilliant in bringing forward new ideas and new hopes; but while I admire their enthusiasm I am more and more convinced that it is the duty of older men like myself occasionally to call attention to certain obvious and commonplace matters which are at times in danger of being overlooked. Perhaps nothing is really commonplace; there is only a commonplace manner of looking at things. At a superficial glance it might seem that no fact was more plain than that the first and most important concern of every librarian, great or small, was with books; and nothing could be more commonplace than the statement that he should know as much as possible about them. If, however, we closely scrutinise modern theories, we shall discover that the prevailing disposition is not to bring the librarian closer to books but is rather to take him away from them. Much of our modern library science has but a remote connexion with books. I am the last person to speak slightly of a system of library education which lays stress on technical training, for I am convinced that the work accomplished by the Library Association in this direction during the last few years has not only been of the greatest value to the students themselves, but also to the library world generally. At the same time I cannot avoid the impression that in some respects British and transatlantic aspirations show a dangerous proneness to place too much emphasis on questions which at their best are but matters of office routine.

I do not wish to depreciate the importance of clerly skill in administrative details, but I fear the desire to advance what I ask to be permitted to call transcendental librarianship may limit the field of our common usefulness. The best methods of filing, labelling, stamping, accounts and book-keeping, fittings and other esoteric mysteries are of moderate value compared with skill in cataloguing, classifying and dealing with books themselves. It should be remembered that it is only when he is in direct association with books that a librarian has a claim to belong to one of the liberal professions. The severely practical man is apt to undervalue the mere book man. Both sides of our profession have their usefulness. The model librarian must be two-sided—at once a man of business and a man of learning and reflection.

My object is not to repeat the oft-told story of the advantages of books and the delights of reading. I do not forget that I am speaking to a body of highly competent adults, but I desire to offer a few remarks on a side of librarianship which in my judgment cannot be too frequently discussed.

The relation of the librarian to books has a threefold aspect, a kind of *trinoda necessitas* :—

First, the handling of books.

Second, the looking at books.

Third, the reading of books.

The aspects of this triple obligation is in logical order of importance. No man can read a book without looking at and handling it, but he can handle books without looking at them or reading them. Now as to what I call

I. The Handling of Books.

Librarians are in a widely different position to the rest of the world as regards their relation to books. These are the subject-matter of their business, and readers expect that librarians—perhaps they are sometimes disappointed—should know not only the present contents of the collection they administer but also all about books which ought to form part of the collection. This may be unattainable perfection in all cases, but it is of the greatest importance that every librarian should have acquired the superficial but highly valuable

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knowledge involved in handling his own books. I mean that he should not restrict himself to the work of organisation, but that he should pride himself in taking some share in the choice, the cataloguing, and the arrangement of his library; that he should inspect the books before buying them, that the books should be catalogued from the actual volumes, and that he should not blindly depend upon cut and dried classifications but apply himself to the systematisation of his collection in the manner best adapted to the requirements of his readers. No two libraries are exactly alike, and the librarian should exercise his originality in improving the methods of others. There is no finality of system in any department of his work.

I repeat that the first duty of every librarian—whether he be the head of a large institution, a modest assistant, or the sole custodian of a small collection—is that he should handle books. This may appear so manifest a truism that I may seem to be straining my claim to call attention to the obvious in placing so much stress on this necessity, but as I have already hinted, modern library progress tends to take the attention of the librarian more and more from the actual handling of books. The development of co-operative cataloguing; the exclusive use of special guides to book selection; uniform systems of classification; the adoption of common schemes of mechanical methods, all conduce to the suppression of the individuality and personality of the librarian. So far as I can picture the librarian of the future, he will be equipped with so many technical appliances that with a little care on his part he need never touch a book. The universal adoption of uniform methods would in time do away with trained librarians altogether. In the perfect system imagined by some idealists all libraries of a common type would resemble each other except in size. All would be housed in identical buildings, arranged after the same pattern, the same books would be described by the same catalogues. In time men and women attendants might be dispensed with in favour of *automata*. The reader would never want to ask for a book. Being able to refer to a Universal Index to Knowledge compiled by one of our industrious sub-com-

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mittees, he would merely have to go to a keyboard and arrange a few figures under the Dewey system to have the required book picked off the shelf by a mechanical hand and then tumbled down in front of him by means of a pneumatic tube. Perhaps in time he may even be relieved of the trouble of reading by having the information he is in search of imparted to him by hypnotic suggestion. I cannot say that such a bibliothecal utopia appeals much to me. All utopias are like to be very dreary if carried to the extent of realisation. I see no good in doing away with the harmless necessary librarian, and the more he retains his primitive function of one who himself handles books and delivers to each applicant the volume which he knows the latter ought to read, the more is he likely to carry out his duties with success. A craving for uniformity is not the sign of progress but of degeneracy. It is a mark of the times; a kind of mental socialism akin to the political socialism which is so rapidly spreading in every direction. I do not want to wander into matters outside my province, but as Herbert Spencer wisely pointed out there is a bad side to good things as well as a good side to bad things. All these various endeavours to produce better work by co-operate effort are good so far as they establish a higher standard of efficiency: they are mischievous when they prevent natural improvement by the evolution of individual exertion endeavouring to cope with special cases of difficulty. The note of socialism, which I may call collective sentimentality, is to repress the individual in favour of what is vainly thought to be the general advantage of the community. It is due to the fundamental laziness and weakness of human nature and the desire of each man to put upon his neighbour the duty of working out his own mental and social salvation. This is why I think the craze for uniformity is a sign of degeneracy.

The point of these remarks may seem wide of the subject under discussion, but I want to force home the fact that the general course of modern library progress is to divert the librarian from the necessity of personally handling books. This practice can alone teach a knowledge of books, for librarians, including the most competent, must be always

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learning, and no one can expect to attain a knowledge of books simply by reading about them. It is only in a small library that a librarian can give much time to cataloguing and classification, for this is the kind of experience which gives the best knowledge of books, but every librarian can so arrange matters that some of the stream of literature passes through his hands. By the handling of books I mean something more than mere physical contact. There is a visual as well as a tactile handling, and this consideration leads me to the next division of my subject,

II. The Looking at Books.

It is difficult to draw a hard and fast line, but what I call the looking at books is something between their mere physical manipulation and actual reading. Oppressed by the details of business routine, overworked, with little leisure, the librarian is expected to show himself an authority on all subjects of human interest and to possess a bowing if not an intimate personal acquaintance with the whole printed world. How is he to set himself to work in order to deserve even to a very limited degree this exalted reputation?

In the first place his mental culture must be extensive rather than intensive. He cannot expect to be quite at home in any one large field of learning, but he has to familiarise himself with the pathways and fingerposts of knowledge. These are the standard works of reference, the chief sources of facts and opinions in all classes of literature, and the best methods of literary and historical investigation. He must know how to hunt for information on any given subject. The immensity of the world of books and the bewildering flood of literature in all tongues which is overwhelming him day by day makes it necessary for him to train himself in rapid methods of knowing something of the subject-matter and comparative value of a book without the labour of perusal. This is an art which cannot be taught but it can be acquired by long and diligent practice. A glance at the title, the style of publication, the size, the literary form are sufficient to guide one skilled in looking at books. This was Dr. Johnson's art. Adam Smith observed that "Johnson knew more books

than any man alive. . . . He had a peculiar facility in seizing at once what was valuable in any book without submitting to the labour of perusing it from beginning to end."

It is a useful habit never to pass a strange bookcase without glancing at the contents. Boswell tells us how when visiting Mr. Cambridge at Twickenham Johnson "ran eagerly to one side of the room intent on poring over the backs of the books. Sir Joshua observed (aside), 'He runs to the books as I do to the pictures: but I have the advantage. I can see much more of the pictures than he can of the books.' Mr. Cambridge, upon this, politely said, 'Dr. Johnson, I am going with your pardon to accuse myself, for I have the same custom which I perceive you have. But it seems odd that one should have such a desire to look at the backs of books.' Johnson, ever ready for contest, instantly started from his reverie, wheeled about and answered, 'Sir, the reason is very plain. Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it. When we inquire into any subject the first thing we have to do is to know what books have treated of it. This leads us to look at catalogues and the backs of books in libraries.'" A man may only know an author by reputation, but even the sight of the back of a work by him stamps on his memory some pregnant facts. He has read of a book but has never seen it; a fugitive look will bring its form, size and resting-place before him.

The more careful examination comes next. These are progressive steps, for the proper study of bibliography is based upon the handling and looking at books. Like anatomy, with which it has a certain analogy, it must be studied from the subject. In bibliography title-knowledge and all second-hand information should be avoided. Even lists of authorities and subject bibliographies are of no value either to the compiler or reader unless the facts be taken from the sources themselves. When speaking of bibliography of course I refer to the wider view as treating of all printed literature, ancient and modern, and not only to antiquarian curiosities. No book, however unimportant at first sight, can be said to be insusceptible or unworthy of

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description from some point of view, and no librarian of any keenness need be reminded to keep all his faculties on the alert when he is among strange books. De Morgan aptly said that "the most worthless book of a bygone day is a record worthy of preservation". Librarians, as well as booksellers, from the very nature of their occupations, have unequalled opportunities for learning about books. Their requirements are not identical, but there is much to be gained from the bookseller, especially as regards prices, comparative rarity, peculiarities of individual copies, and other matters of interest in the external history of books. The point of view of the bookseller has much in common with that of the collector; their interest in literature is largely if not wholly concerned with the physical qualities of books. The librarian and bibliographer must take a wider and deeper interest. The right study of bibliography extends beyond mere title knowledge. It includes an investigation of the nature and contents of books and their proper place in the history of human thought and social development. The obligation of the librarian to handle and look at books is closely bound up with this theory of bibliography. These two aspects of his relation to books deal with the purely professional side of the question. The final aspect is with

III. The Reading of Books.

Goethe in one of his conversations with Eckermann said that people did not know how much time and trouble it took to learn how to read; he himself had been eighty years in the attempt and could not claim to have attained his aim. I have not the vanity to attempt to teach where Goethe had failed, but I venture to think that some of our time may usefully be employed in the consideration of the subject as it concerns ourselves.

The conclusions I wish to set before you are very few and very simple. There exist innumerable treatises on books and reading, from the *Philobiblon* of Richard de Bury to the more modern dissertations of Raynaud and Mabillon and the brilliant addresses of Frederic Harrison, John Morley and Arthur Balfour of our own day, but none of them deal

especially with the requirements of the librarian. His object is not to make himself a deep scholar or cultured man of letters but a better servant of the public, holding as he does an important office of trust and responsibility. His reading must differ from that of most other people. He is credited perhaps with more knowledge than he actually possesses, but he is usually desirous of making up the leeway of his ignorance. He cannot be deep but should be wide in his studies. The more he reads the better, with certain qualifications and exceptions which I will point out. Superficial knowledge, sufficiently extensive and properly co-ordinated, is all that can be expected of him. His reading may be broadly grouped under four heads: (1) professional or technical studies; (2) the acquisition of general knowledge; (3) mental and moral improvement; and (4) recreation. No hard and fast line can be kept between these divisions, and they must intermingle. Putting aside the classes of professional and recreative reading, we are left those for information and mental development, or those which exercise what may be styled a therapeutic action on the intellect. That I use the metaphor of medical science may be permitted when we recollect the famous inscription over the doorway of the library of Osymandyas—"The Dispensary of the Soul". The approval of particular methods of study and courses of reading is quite beyond my scope. You are as well acquainted as I am with that varied literature and need no suggestions. Each man must choose whatever system best meets his special requirements. The many eminent men who have taken upon themselves the duty of telling us what and how we should read differ widely in their recommendations, but they are unanimous when they speak of the danger and uselessness of haphazard and unsystematic reading. The desultory reader is to them *Anathema Maranatha*. I cannot agree with this sweeping condemnation, if it is intended to include an objection to variety of subject. The main things to avoid are the desultory kind of book and the desultory frame of mind. Miscellaneous reading of good books with attentive intelligence cannot fail to nourish the mind, and a pleasing change of subject does away with

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that loathing we all feel for an enforced and unvaried diet, whether mental or physical. Our teachers insist too much on the necessity of orderly and systematic reading, forgetful of the weakness of mankind. Their precepts tend to make reading an irksome toil rather than a delight to the soul.

What should be the first aim of the librarian? I have no hesitation in saying that it is to make himself a master of the great and famous books, so well known by name, but which are far less read than is usually supposed. His library is full of criticism of all kinds dealing with the noblest examples of literature, but most of my hearers will agree with me that the texts are less read than the commentaries, and the commentators on commentaries. There are plenty of guides to reading but the best works require no guide. They are world-famous and so famous that they are often forgotten. Few persons deliberately set themselves to the exclusive reading of great books: I refer not only to the great imaginative writers, the poets and dramatists, but also to the historians, the philosophers, the theologians, the legists, the economists. The great thoughts of great men delivered in language of eloquence, dignity and power, are in danger of being lost to us as we have only the time to read what smaller men of later ages say about them. Emerson has been blamed for his advice "to read only famed books," but surely an acquaintance with the great masterpieces is a paramount necessity for a librarian, having in mind the fact that so large a proportion of the contents of his library are largely devoted to their elucidation and criticism. A second recommendation is to accustom oneself to read what the French call *ouvrages de longue haleine* (not to be translated long-winded works), weighty achievements in many volumes which require sustained attention extending over a long period. This is a special faculty which if acquired and kept up by use is not difficult to retain, but if once the practice of reading books in several volumes be lost it is very difficult to recall. It is a matter of habit, like the learning of languages. If a man knows one foreign language fairly well he never finds it difficult to learn others, even late in life, but it is not so easy to begin to learn strange tongues for the first time at a mature age.

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Another valuable habit is that of frequently reading books which demand thought and close attention. For my own part I delight in novels and poetry, and am the last person to speak ill of such reading. Works of fancy and imagination are priceless gifts to mankind in their office of calming and stimulating the emotions, yet even poetry and prose fiction, if well chosen, need not be read solely in idle amusement. This class of reading, however, only satisfies one form of intellectual craving. It does not help to strengthen the reasoning faculty; and the mind, agreeably soothed by the magic of poetry and romance, does not readily take up more serious tasks. The longer and the more one indulges in merely recreative reading the more difficult one finds it to turn to severer studies. I have already appealed in favour of variety in kind of reading, but I am not forgetful of the self-education which every sensible man carries on as long as he lives, that is to say, the continuous practice of reading by subject, taking up book after book on a methodical system with a definite object. While I recommend that a man should always keep at least one subject in hand to be studied methodically, I have no sympathy with that pedagogical aspect of books which would only allow them to be read on a set plan. Nothing can be more uninspiring than this dull and pedantic view of the duties of a reader.

The whole art of reading has been summed up by Bacon when he told us that "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly and with diligence and attention". As I have said before no one needs a guide to the great books, which should be read wholly or in part, the others are the many millions which from the librarian's point of view need only be handled or looked at. Schopenhauer reduces the art almost to finality in the axiom, "In regard to reading it is a very important thing to be able to refrain". We see that even *The Best Books* of the year make a bulky list. How many of these can a hard-working man expect to be able to read during twelve months? Perhaps a dozen, and he must not neglect

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the best books of other languages, besides the arrears of past reading which he ought to make good. Fortunately most books do not deserve to be read at all, and do not deserve even to be looked at except by the bibliographer.

When one considers the mass of good books yet unread, the shortness of life, and the very few hours of leisure, it is terrible to think of the number of priceless reading hours lost in looking at daily newspapers, magazines, reviews, paltry fiction, and books of temporary notoriety. No man should be ashamed of ignorance of the latest fashion in literature. New books generally need be only looked at, not read. There are certain classes which should be seldom or never read, such as primers and introductions, books about books, most literary histories, abstracts and *résumés*, nearly all series of publications, every book that pretends to be a royal road to knowledge. Historical novels as a means of learning history should be avoided because life is too short to read sufficient history to correct the faulty judgments of the novelist, and the subject of history is in itself sufficiently interesting without having to call in the assistance of fiction. I have often urged that bibliography should be taught in schools. Another subject which the schoolmaster might take up is the art of reading, part of which is the duty of avoidance, or to use the colloquial expressions "skimming" or "skipping". Most young people are disgusted at the very threshold of life by being told that they must read all books through. Nothing is more ridiculous than this recommendation. None but the very best should be read from cover to cover, and not even the best book is worth reading when it begins to weary. I would go much further and suggest that the art of rapid reading should be taught. By practice any one can so train himself that he can read nine books out of ten, not by laboriously running the eye from the beginning to the end of each line, but by glancing down the middle of the page and only stopping for a more systematic perusal when there is something really new. Rapid reading is not easy reading, for properly carried on it involves a very intense concentration of thought. Most books only reproduce the old facts and old ideas so that the greater part of reading is repetition.

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There is no deception about this on the part of authors ; man expects the whole world of thought to be rewritten for each generation. The trained reader restricts his attention to what is new to him. He only seeks to add to his store of facts and ideas, passing over everything that is familiar. In historical studies this method is particularly necessary, and it was only in this way that the late Lord Acton was able to deal with uncounted thousands of volumes. Mrs. Knowles said of Dr. Johnson : " He knows how to read better than any one ; he gets at the substance of a book directly ; he tears out the heart of it ". Johnson admirably depicts himself in his account of Barretier : " He had a quickness of apprehension and firmness of memory which enabled him to read with incredible rapidity and at the same time to retain what he read, so as to be able to recollect and apply it. He turned over volumes in an instant and selected what was useful for his purpose."

It is the duty of every man to devote some time every day to serious reading. Even one hour a day is better than nothing. " There is no business, no avocation whatever, which will not permit a man, who has the inclination, to give a little time every day to study," said the great classical scholar Daniel Wytttenbach. The only time when reading must be forbidden to the librarian is during business hours, which is the proper time for handling and looking at books. Quotations are like words which by constant use and misuse often change their original meaning and are repeated to illustrate some idea quite foreign to the original intention of the author. Mark Pattison's interjection about " the librarian who reads is lost," only meant that Casaubon was an inefficient librarian who wasted in selfish studies the hours which should have been given to professional work.

In the lives of famous scholars we may find descriptions of many devices used by them as mechanical helps in reading. Some place reliance in copious note-taking ; others compile commonplace books, like Southey ; some, like the well-known classical scholar Mitford, pen brief references at the end of their books ; Sir William Hamilton advocated " intelligent underlining " ; Matthew Arnold was fond of copying out

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striking thoughts in his diary for future literary use; the late Lord Acton, probably the most voracious reader of modern times, made a little pencil tick against the passages which struck him, and occasionally copied out extracts on pieces of paper of uniform size which he arranged in boxes—these notes often consisted simply of rows of names of authorities. Narrow slips of paper placed in a volume acted as reminders of some point of special importance. These pieces of paper are still to be seen in many of the volumes in the Acton Library at Cambridge, and when I visited the library two years ago they vividly recalled the happy time when I saw them in daily use, while I had the honour to be Lord Acton's librarian thirty-three years ago. Each person must suit his own convenience. Many people never make notes or extracts but trust to memory alone. All do not possess large libraries with the privilege of being able to write notes and make marks in books. Most librarians have to trust to borrowing, indeed I strongly recommend all who earnestly want to read to borrow rather than buy. My own experience is that I rarely buy a book to read it but only for reference. The great advantage of the system of borrowing is that one is forced to read the book within a given time. The material possession of many volumes is not a matter of importance to a student who has ready access to libraries. When a man has once read a book carefully and thoughtfully he is the owner of that book in the most complete sense of the word.

How much does one remember in reading? Individuals differ widely in this respect. Some remember little; others much. A great scholar once told me that he thought himself fortunate if he retained 10 per cent. Some recollect facts and dates; some only remember ideas and general conclusions; some have a good verbal memory for exact quotation; others fail in one or other of these special faculties; some trust to various systematic devices to strengthen their memory; others to writing out extracts or abstracts. Even the worst memory can be improved: two things are necessary, strict attention during reading and deliberate cogitation after reading. It is useless to make reading a mere optical

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amusement; the brain must work with the eye. The development of association is the best training of the memory. Prof. William James says that person has a good memory who has many chains of association available for dragging up impressions into consciousness from the abyss of oblivion. Is reading valueless when so much of it is labour lost? I venture to reply that it is not. Subconscious memory plays a great part in our mental life. The world of thought has one resemblance with the physical world. After walking through a new country one does not recollect every step of the way and may only retain a vague impression of the progress made, but a second expedition will bring back all the features of the route with startling freshness. This is also true of reading. The second perusal of a book will reveal the fact that few things are entirely forgotten. I would go so far as to say that nothing well learnt is ever forgotten.

When a book begins to weary it should be put aside; one should either take up an entirely different class of work or let the mind lie dormant. Over-much reading has a mental effect like that produced by over-much eating. The eupeptic reader delights in his book and remembers what he reads. Mental food requires to be varied occasionally and not restricted to one diet. It is well not to repress at times the natural and healthy craving for the indulgence of fancy and imagination and the satisfaction of spiritual emotion. *Le changement d'étude est toujours un delassement pour moi* was the motto of the great chancellor Daguesseau.

Much may be said of the abuse of reading. Idle dreaming over books is an evil: all reading without intellectual assimilation is a waste of time which might just as well have been passed in sleep or cards. There is no merit in the process of reading. The reader must co-ordinate his information and weigh the thoughts stored in his mind, for knowledge is not a vague recollection of scrappy facts. "Nothing in truth," says Dugald Stewart, "has such a tendency to weaken, not only the powers of invention, but the intellectual powers in general, as a habit of extensive and various reading without reflection." John Locke also reminds us that "reading furnishes the mind only with

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materials of knowledge. . . . We are of the ruminating kind, and it is not enough to cram ourselves with a great load of collections; unless we chew them over again, they will not give us strength and nourishment."

"There are three classes of readers," says Goethe, "some enjoy without judgment; others judge without enjoyment; some there are who judge while they enjoy and enjoy while they judge." It is to this class that I hope you all belong. Your calling is not one which leads to worldly wealth but it is one which opens out a prospect of attaining an adequate intellectual competency. You are happily placed in all your relations to books, and zealously and skilfully to administer them is your life-long and beloved occupation. This is a high and solemn office, and for this reason alone your reading should be conducted with a certain seriousness.

I will therefore leave you with two passages from two works of devotion. One is:—

"Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" (*Collect for Second Sunday in Advent*).

The other is:—

"If thou wilt receive profit, read with humility, simplicity, and faith; and seek not at any time the fame of being learned" (*Thomas à Kempis, Book I., ch. v.*).

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