# MAN AND BOY:
## MODIFYING MASCULINITIES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP, 1850-1950.
## WITH A CASE STUDY OF THE INTER-WAR LIBRARIANSHIP MASONIC CIRCLE.

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Stereotyping afflicts all professional and occupational groups. In respect of library work, the stereotypical images are relatively complicated, cross-cut as they are by issues of gender identity. Stereotypes in librarianship might be seen to run along a feminine-masculine continuum, ranging from the effete dilettante thirsting for imaginative literature and an emotive social idealism (feminine), through to the hard-nosed organiser enthused by the prospect of social progress achieved by reason and utilitarian knowledge (masculine).

THE FEMIMINE STEREOTYPE IN LIBRARIANSHIP
The feminine stereotype, virtually synonymous in the second half of the twentieth century with librarianship per se (Newmyer, 1976, p. 44), is informed by a series of supposedly female characteristics; women in librarianship are passive, suppliant, patient, non-intellectual, less happy with strategy and policy-making than with routine chores, only ever assertive in a petty, rule-enforcing way and, above all, homely. They are also primarily interested in promoting 'soft' culture and imaginative literature of the sentimental kind, and are driven by a highly moralistic social idealism. This is the world of the 'library hostess' *naturally* dedicated to her calling, which Dee Garrison (1979) so vividly depicts in her study of early librarianship in the United

States. In the context of Britain, the notion that librarianship harbours intrinsically female characteristics has been no less evident. 'To the intelligent girl', commented one newspaper in 1937, 'the profession of librarianship offers a field where the feminine qualities of accuracy, tact and patience may be brought to their best use'.[1] That same year the librarian of Nottinghamshire – a 'slim young woman with short, fair curly hair, steady grey eyes behind light horn-rimmed spectacles, good taste in dress, plenty of enthusiasm and an entirely unconscious way of betraying her confidence' – explained that in the context of book selection and the task of matching book with reader, 'few will deny that the mysterious sixth sense, or gift of intuition, is one of the accepted assets of an intelligent woman'.[2]

## THE MASCULINE STEREOTYPE IN LIBRARIANSHIP

At the other end of the spectrum lies the masculine stereotype, more historic than its feminine opposite by virtue of the fact that before the twentieth century library work was an essentially male occupation. The masculine stereotype in library work can be unpacked into a number of 'library masculinities', clearly overlapping but, for the purpose of analysis, identifiable as distinct behavioural categories. First, the *bureaucrat*: rational, devoted to organisational efficiency and, at times, thrusting and entrepreneurial. Second, the *intellectual*: quiet, reserved, an advocate of 'useful' literature and, as befits the single-mindedness of his spiritual mission, sexually inert.[3] Third, the *eccentric*: socially detached, in extreme cases a social misfit, and in the tradition of the obsessed Victorian collector. Finally, the *reformer*: evangelical, fiery and controlling, but also closely tied to the tenets of liberalism. (This final category might be best positioned nearer to the centre of the female-male continuum; for the devout, moralising do-gooder seeking to purvey 'healthy' culture for the assimilation of rational habits conducive to the social order is clearly recognisable as an element within the female stereotype also.)

## HISTORIC MASCULINITIES

At first glance, these several 'library masculinities' might be judged to be as sociologically invalid and unhelpful as the feminine stereotype. However, they become more convincing when compared with the masculinities which historians have attributed to nineteenth-century perceptions of manliness. In the Victorian age and well into the twentieth century, as Roper and Tosh (1991, p. 2) point out, true manliness encompassed intellectual energy (the self-imposed isolation required being seen as physically demanding);[4] moral courage;[5] respectability; sexual purity; and stoicism.

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[1] A career for girls, *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 May 1937 (Library Association Newspaper Cuttings, March-July 1937).

[2] Woman who will gauge Notts' taste in books, *Nottingham Evening News*, 8 April 1937 (Library Association Newspaper Cuttings, March-July 1937).

[3] Of interest here is the sexually frustrated – or hesitant – character of the Welsh public librarian John Lewis in Kingsley Amis's novel *That uncertain feeling* (1955), later portrayed by Peter Sellers in the film *Only two can play* (1962).

[4] See Ward (1998) for a study of the physical aspect of intellectual work in respect of the Victorian pioneer editors of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

It was also defined by the propensity for rational thought. The bureaucracies of modernity, for example, as Morgan (1996, p. 44) argues, have been 'major sites for the development and elaboration of modern masculinities'.[6] Ostensibly impersonal and genderless, certainly in terms of Weber's gender-blind ideal-type (Franzway, Court and Connell, 1989, p. 30), bureaucratic management - abstract, rational, objective, instrumental and controlling - has been essentially masculine in the way it has been implemented and theorised. (Collison and Hearn, p. 19) Far from being the impractical dreamer of the popular imagination, librarians have embraced techno-bureaucratic methods with enthusiasm. For example, Philip Larkin (1977, p. 533) described how, while working for a Birmingham branch library in the 1940s, he was subjected to a constant bureaucratic overseeing by the City Librarian: 'Hardly a day passed when I did not receive a letter signed by him correcting me about the details of an application, or pointing out that a parcel had been badly tied.' A case might be made, therefore, for viewing the library profession ▢ bureaucratic to its core ▢ as masculine in nature.[7] This is certainly true of the period under examination here, also by virtue of the fact that the intellectualism and virtuousness which is seen as having defined manliness well into the twentieth century were similarly major informers of librarianship during the same period.

FROM MAN TO BOY

The historic masculinities noted above map neatly onto the ethical and cultural configuration of Victorian and early twentieth-century public librarianship. Essentially they constitute a *manful* occupation, descriptive as they are of the work of adult males. Yet many who worked in public libraries before the Second World War, certainly before the emergence of librarianship as a graduate profession in the 1960s, began their careers as little more than boys (increasingly criticised in the twentieth century, it should be noted, for the poor standard of service they were often said to offer), remaining in the profession until retirement and progressing slowly up the professional ladder by means of an arduous system of time-serving. Thus, to have served in public libraries 'man and boy' was for many librarians ▢ even those who began work in their post-adolescent years ▢ no idle boast. In an age when professionalism was to a large degree defined by length of service, personal professional advance, like physical and emotional development, was inevitably linked to manful maturity.

It is interesting to speculate, however, the extent to which men in libraries retained 'boyish' attitudes to their work. It may be possible to modify our view of masculinities in early librarianship by concentrating less on manly traits and more on boyishness in professional practice. In several areas of professional activity in the first century of public librarianship, male

[5] This might be deemed to include 'godliness' and its 'muscular christianity' derivative, as argued by Newsome (1961, p. 27). 'There is a manliness which is identical with virtue', wrote the headmaster of Marlborough in 1874: quoted by Vance (1975, p. 115).

[6] For an exploration of the link between reason and masculinity see Seidler (1994).

[7] To argue, however, that women have barely engaged in the bureaucratic apparatus of librarianship would be misleading. In an article entitled 'Girls in libraries', the *Nottingham Journal*, 16 January 1922 (Library Association Newspaper Cuttings 1914-1922), explained that: 'It is necessary [for the young women working in a library] to be a perfect master of method, to be orderly, to delight in making good after some member of the public has succeeded in producing chaos.' The same feminine bureaucratic rigour can be seen in the context of the rationalisation of housework in the nineteenth century. (Davidoff, 1995, ch. 3)

librarians might be considered to have displayed boyish rather than manly behaviour. Four aspects of professional practice are analysed here: technology and systems; conflicts conducted in the library press; antagonism towards users; and networking. Each of these aspects, it might be suggested, offer considerable potential for theorising boyish masculinities in public librarianship in the period to around 1950; together they encourage the view of the public library as partly 'playground' rather than as a wholly and permanently 'serious' institution.

YOUTHFUL FASCINATION WITH GADGETS AND SYSTEMS

The masculine delight in technology and mechanism (including the notion of 'system') is a much explored theme in gender studies. The affinity of men to technology is not 'natural'. According to Cockburn (1985), technology is a historical aspect of male power, for women have been actively excluded from the formulation and, in many cases, the exploitation of technological knowledge.

Men's technological dominance is particularly stark in the information and computing fields (Clegg, Mayfield and Trayhurn, 1999; Cockburn, 1988, p. 38; Game and Pringle, 1983, p. 89); and there is evidence to suggest that male interest in the hardware and systems of information and communication technologies is rooted in boyhood. (Green and Higgins, 1999) Certainly, early public librarians appeared enthralled by the *manual* information technologies of the day. As the nineteenth century progressed, wrote Savage (1950, p. 322), they 'wanted more time for their gadgetry', and whereas bibliographers 'couldn't become excited about tip-up tram steps for tall indicators', public librarians certainly did. The many manuals of, and essays on, library economy which informed early librarianship (e.g. Brown, 1897; Roebuck and Thorne, 1904) were almost entirely written by men; and whether it be a fascination with the bureaucracy of library forms or the specification for a library ventilation system, the discourses in which their ideas were set down were replete with a youthful ⌘ if not a boyish ⌘ enthusiasm for the technical question in hand. (However, as Chris Baggs' and Mary Maack's essays in this volume makes clear, this is not to say that women displayed no interest in the gadgetry and 'machinery' of librarianship; although it may be the case ⌘ and only further research can establish this ⌘ that their interest was more at the level of day-to-day operational detail than of systems policy and planning or the technicalities of hardware.)

IMMATURE CONFLICTS IN THE LIBRARY PRESS

Debates over issues of policy and practice reflect a healthy state of affairs in any profession. Throughout the history of modern librarianship such debates have been numerous; and in some cases, as in the question of what constitutes 'good' reading, they have also been enduring. However, controversies have not occurred simply at the level of objective, 'scientific' argument and counter-argument. Rather, they have been overlaid by conflicts operating within the professional culture of librarianship ⌘ conflicts colourfully articulated by Ernest Savage in 1950 in a frank article for the *Library Association Record* which he entitled 'Movements and men of the past in the Association'. The library profession has rarely been unified, displaying as it has done tensions between male and female; town and country; the professional and non-professional; the technicians and the 'cultured'; information people and non-information people;

practitioners and researchers; and trainers and educators. Public librarians ⌐◻ mostly male, as the title of Savage's article indicates ⌐◻ have often found themselves at the forefront of these conflicts. Heated arguments generated by such pre-1914 issues as free access to the shelves (the open access revolution) (Black, 1994) and the popularity of light fiction (the great fiction debate) (Sturges and Barr, 1992) immediately spring to mind. In surveying the library press in respect of these and other contentious issues a sense of boyish spitefulness is imparted by the various discourses served up ostensibly in the name of a detached, technical improvement in services. J.P. Briscoe, for example, in addressing the question of stock selection in 1900, commented snidely that 'it would be a great help to librarians if members of Book Selection Committees would read a book occasionally'.[8] Derogatory, flip remarks such as this reflected the paucity of evidence-based argument and the prevalence of subjective, personal ⌐◻ and in some respects childish ⌐◻ reflection and rumination in librarianship discourses.

PLAYFUL ANTAGONISM TOWARDS USERS

Just as many children ⌐◻ and some adults ⌐◻ have traditionally seen libraries as playgrounds, as places for 'larking about' and confronting authority, so too have librarians often adopted a playful attitude to aspects of their work, most notably to their interface with users. The rift between librarian and reader is neatly described in Ken Hornsby's biographical account of the short period he spent as a young library assistant, *Is that the library speaking* (1978). The public, he observed, 'were a different race; strictly over-the-counter people who did odd things and asked odd questions' (p. 17); they were 'exhausting, belligerent, cantankerous, demanding, searching, realistic, hard work, and not to be put off'. (p. 55) Although this evidence lies outside the period under consideration, arguably it is representative of a long tradition of antagonism between professional and public in the library setting (although this should not overshadow the excellent relations that have also existed).

Librarians often expressed this antagonism, or sense of difference, in a playful way. This is seen in the frequent references one finds to librarians' amusement over the reference enquiries they encountered: 'Librarians get plenty of laughs out of some queer questions people ask them', declared a newspaper report in 1939 in highlighting the story of a man who, in the absence of his wife, needed to know how to cook his dinner and so telephoned his local public library.[9] Recounting the eccentric habits of readers ⌐◻ including what borrowers leave in books ⌐◻ has also been an enduring theme.[10] To cope with a difficult and idiosyncratic public, librarians thus created, at times, a 'fantasy playground' world behind the scenes, where users were depicted as amazing and amusing 'other' beings. Much of the evidence of this boyish behaviour comes from male discourses, although the idea that this perspective was exclusively male is highly unlikely.

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[8] *Library Association Record*, 2, October 1900, p. 532.
[9] Husband wanted to cook steak and onions ⌐◻ so telephoned the library, *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, 18 January 1939. For other examples see The department that answers posers, *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, 13 January 1950 and Swift (1926, p. 6)
[10] Book-borrowers and their habits, *Chamber's Journal*, April 1937 (Library Association Newspaper Cuttings, March-July 1937).

NETWORKING: THE INTER-WAR LIBRARIANSHIP MASONIC CIRCLE

Various sets of documents are available to the historian which suggest the existence of a tight, male network of librarians, corresponding with each other on professional issues and opportunities for personal professional advancement.[11]  When William B. Thorne was awarded an honorary fellowship by the Library Association in 1938, having served Stepney Public Libraries virtually 'man and boy' for nearly forty years, it was commented that that he had made his library famous partly through 'his voluminous correspondence, written in a beautiful, regular hand, to *brother* [my emphasis] assistants all over the world'. (Sayers, 1938, p. 357) Reading these correspondence, one gets the distinct impression of an 'old school tie' network in operation; or, because a shared experience of schooling among librarians was in truth rare, perhaps a more accurate way of describing the close links which emerged between male librarians would be 'mateship', a form of relationship learnt and rooted in boyhood.

The most vivid manifestation of this boyish networking in operation was the involvement by librarians in Freemasonry between the wars. The Librarianship Masonic Circle was launched in 1927 and operated, as far as the records indicate, for a little under a decade.[12] It never attained the status of a full Lodge. The distinction between 'Lodge' and 'Circle' is important. Lodge status was higher than that of a Circle.[13] Lodges had to have permanent accommodation and meet four times or more each year, at least one meeting being in the permanent home.[14] As the librarianship brotherhood revolved around the Library Association's annual conference, Lodge status, not surprisingly, alluded them throughout.[15]

Fifty-one brethren attended the Leeds dinner in 1926. By July 1928 over ninety members had been admitted to the Circle.[16]  Only practising or former Freemasons were considered for membership.[17] Members were drawn from a variety of libraries, but the vast majority were from the *public* library sector, illustrating the dominant role public librarians played in the Library Association at the time. The membership lists[18] read like a 'Who's Who?' of early twentieth century public librarianship: names such as Albert Cawthorne

[11] E.g. the collections of letters to Walter Powell and William B. Thorne held by the Library Association. See also the large number of library related correspondence of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust held by the Scottish Record Office.

[12] All items noted here relating to the Librarianship Masonic Circle between 1926 and 1938 are to be found in the Scottish Record Office, File Reference GD281/13/44.

[13] Two reasons in support of Lodge status were put forward. First, that many librarians had been Freemasons in the past but having moved to another part of the country had not been able to join a Lodge in their new locality. Second, that many librarians wanted to be Freemasons but wished to avoid making local connections for various reasons. Memorandum on the formation of a Lodge by the Librarianship Masonic Circle, by Richard Wright, November 1929.

[14] J.M. Mitchell to C.R. Sanderson, 18 September 1926.

[15] There is evidence in the records of only one meeting additional to the annual conference having taken place in London in February 1929. Circular from C.R. Sanderson, 31 January 1929.

[16] C.R. Sanderson to the membership of the Circle, 14 July 1928.

[17] E.g. in 1928 bretheren had intended to invite the President of the Library Association to be President of the Circle also, until it was discovered that he was not a member of the Craft. C.R. Sanderson to J.M. Mitchell, 3 July 1928.

[18] Three lists are deposited in the records of the Circle: those who attended the Craft dinner in Leeds in 1926; a typed list of members circulated by C.R Sanderson, 14 July 1928; and a printed list produced for the gathering in Blackpool in September 1928.

(Stepney), Alfred Lancaster (St. Helen's) and George Roebuck (Walthamstow). Other leading lights included Ernest Baker (Director of the School of Librarianship, University College) and J.M. Mitchell (Secretary of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and author of its important report on public libraries in 1924). Mitchell appears to have played a major role in the foundation of the Circle. The pivotal part he played in the Circle is illustrated by the fact that the only documentary evidence that has so far come to light of the Circle's existence is in the form of the letters sent to and from Mitchell in his official capacity at the Trust.

Each member of the Circle was listed with what appears to have been their individual Masonic identity code attached ⬒ this being a combination of their local Lodge's code name and the personal number issued to them by that Lodge. These codes make interesting reading in their own right. Exotic identities such as Edwina 4237 and Mendelssohn 2661 (Zebedee Moon was not a code name, but the real name of the chief librarian of Leyton!) are not only intriguing but also underlined the secretive nature of the circle. Yet knowledge of Freemasonry in librarianship was not entirely secret. In 1915, for example, one library journal carried the announcement that Albert Cawthorne of Stepney Public Library had been installed as Worshipful Master of the Borough of Stepney Lodge, following hard on the heels of the appointment of Wimbledon's librarian, Henry Bull, to a similar position in his borough.[19]

In the absence of first-hand testimony it isn't possible to obtain a clear picture of what Freemason librarians got up to at these *supposedly* secret, all-male gatherings. However, something of what occurred can be gleaned from the programmes printed for the dinners. The programme for the 1928 'Craft meal' at Blackpool,[20] for example, included the menu (not surprisingly) and the words to five songs. A programme of entertainment listed the title of these communal songs, as well as the titles of contributions by several solo brethren vocalists. In addition, a number of humorous pieces to be delivered by individual brothers were announced: 'Brother Percy Wilkinson will dispense a little humour', read one item.

Meals were also an occasion for the speechmaking which librarians ⬒ rooted as many of them were in the culture of books and of literary correctness ⬒ so much relished. In 1931 J.M. Mitchell addressed the brethren in a particularly high-minded fashion, attempting to spell out the ethos of the Circle, and linking this to the wider purpose of libraries and librarianship in society.[21] His notes record the ideals of the Craft, as he saw them: brotherhood, service, loyalty, sacrifice and constructiveness. As members of both Craft and the library community, the aim was to display 'a catholic attitude to all we serve'.

The major implication of this evidence is the incongruity it highlights between the ethos of the public library and that of the Freemasonry which librarians embraced. The public library was promoted in professional discourses as an open, rational and democratic public sphere institution ⬒ at least this was the rhetoric. However, Mitchell's belief, noted above, that the Craft similarly displayed a 'catholic attitude' is hardly convincing in view of the exclusive, secretive nature of Masonry. Freemasonry has also been, pre-eminently, a means of perpetuating male power. 'The real secrets of Freemasonry', reported J.S.M. Ward (1923, p.

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[19] *The Librarian and Book World*, 5:9, April 1915, p. 260. My thanks to Dr Chris Baggs for providing this information.

[20] The programme is simply entitled 'Librarianship Masonic Circle, Blackpool, 1928.'

[21] J.M. Mitchell, Manuscript notes on a speech to the 1931 gathering of the Librarianship Masonic Circle.

139), himself a Mason, in a contemporary commentary on the practice, 'do not have reference to physiological so much as to psychological differences which exist fundamentally between men and women ⬠ distinctions of inner qualities, which may be summed up and regarded as the foundations of true manliness in contrast to true womanliness ... The purpose of Freemasonry ... is to fit man, *as man*, to fulfil his duties in life'. There is no reason to suggest that in embracing Masonry librarians did not endorse this sectarian outlook as well.

Certainly in the inter-war years Freemasonry was a closed and prejudiced institution. Candidates for admission had to be professing Christians, and by and large Catholics, whose religion denounced the practice, were excluded. Exclusivity was further based on racist attitudes of the most virulent kind. Ward (1923, p. 107) asked if Freemasonry was 'justified in refusing to admit coloured people?' Answering the question himself, he expressed the belief 'that there are certain races who are not yet sufficiently evolved intellectually, morally, and even spiritually, to be suitable for admission'. (Ward, 1923, p. 154) Clearly, these beliefs did not coincide with the stated social ideals of Masonry ⬠ good fellowship, charity and the search for truth (Ward, 1923, p. 53) ⬠ and certainly not those of public librarianship.

The existence of the Librarianship Circle gives impetus to the argument that the early development of public librarianship was to a large degree driven and overseen by a tight network of men forming a relatively exclusive inner core of the profession. The Circle both reflected and reinforced this exclusive network. There is no solid evidence to suggest that the networking which the Circle undoubtedly assisted spawned nepotism or corruption. However, as one writer on Freemasonry notes, the practice is 'overwhelmingly concentrated in areas where there is strong competition for the available jobs, promotions and contracts'.(Rogers, 1988, pp. 78-79). Clearly, male networking in librarianship did not die a death when the Circle faded away in 1937. But the extent to which Masonry was interwoven with the network after this date is unknown.

A more generous analysis of the 'networking' purpose of the Circle is to consider the contribution it might have made to professional solidarity and collegiality, in particular to the building of a shared ethical purpose. The Circle offered an intimate forum for reinforcing purpose and principles in librarianship. However, to have engaged in such a sharing of aims and ideas, one would not, arguably, have had to engage in the mysterious and playful rituals and the secrecy of Masonic practices ⬠ less a case of professional men behaving badly, strangely or manfully, it might be suggested, than of 'boys will be boys'!

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