# Research Reports

## Cooperative society libraries and newsrooms - their social, educational and cultural role in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century

JEAN EVERITT
Department of Information and Library Studies
University of Wales, Aberystwyth

### Introduction

My research is in its third year and is funded by the Department for Education in the form of a Librarianship and Information Science Studentship. I was once described as the DFE's only historical student, and in view of my status as a 'mature' student, I rather hope that this was a reference to my subject and not my age. It has been said that it is a sign of maturity of a discipline when it is able to study its own history. How can any profession go forward to better things if it does not look back and build on its own past experience? The library and information profession is no exception to this - library history must be considered as important as any other branch of research.

One of the major changes to the social structure of Britain brought about by industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the creation of the working class. Library provision for the new mass readership was not *just* through public libraries, but through a number of bodies committed to provide an educational service to the working classes. My research is essentially an examination of one of the institutions committed to provide such a service by the working man for the working man in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century.

### Background

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, only a small percentage of the working classes were able to read, but by the end of the century, large numbers had mastered this basic skill. Although there was educational legislation later in the century, it is apparent that before this, there were moves via adult education to cultivate knowledge and learning in the working classes, both from within and under the influence of the middle classes. The Industrial Revolution had brought about advances in technology and factory organization which highlighted the growing relevance of literacy; industry now demanded that many of its skilled workers not only had the ability to read and understand drawings, but also acquire some basic scientific knowledge.

Most early attempts at educating the working classes had their initiatives among the upper and middle classes, but by the 1860s the principle of self-help was establishing itself in many aspects of working class life, including education. From the beginning, education was an important feature of cooperative societies, which regarded their members 'not just as customers but as cooperators whose minds, as well as their stomachs, required nourishment.'[1]

### The Cooperative Movement

There was an early move towards cooperation at the beginning of the nineteenth century under the leadership of Robert Owen. The modern Cooperative Movement, however, began in 1844 in the Lancashire textile town of Rochdale, where harsh living conditions inspired 28 working men to form

their own cooperative society - the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers' Society, and it is this modern Movement which forms the basis for my research.

The Pioneers opened a shop in Toad Lane, Rochdale, to sell pure basic goods at fair prices. A share of the profit was returned to the members in the form of a 'dividend', and a proportion of the rest was to be used for social and educational facilities. The Pioneers were convinced of the necessity of education to achieve their purpose - the promotion of cooperation - and so the Toad Lane premises were quickly put to educational use, firstly for lectures and discussions, then a reading room was opened. Plans for a library soon followed. From the beginning libraries were considered to be a major feature of the educational provision of Societies, George Jacob Holyoake, a prominent nineteenth century cooperator, describing the library as the 'soul of the store'[2].

Following registration under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1853, the Pioneers, and many other Societies, allocated a percentage of their net profits to the provision of educational facilities for members. During the early period, this was primarily in the form of libraries and newsrooms. Edwin Barnish, an early librarian of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers' Society, stated that the intention of cooperative society libraries was not only the provision of 'pure and unadulterated articles for consumption, but also the social and intellectual advancement of the members connected therewith'[3]. Available library catalogues show a preponderance of non-fiction material in early cooperative society libraries, confirming its role as an educational provider. Catalogues from the early twentieth century reveal a greater amount of fiction and lighter material in the bookstock.

Around 170 cooperative societies are known to have provided libraries and/or newsrooms for their members, and despite the Public Libraries Act of 1850, which made provision for libraries to be established, many towns declined to adopt the permissive legislation, preferring instead to rely on services provided by the local 'Co-op'. Some societies sold or donated their libraries to the local authorities on the adoption of the Act, but others continued to serve their members, often with a superior service to the one available publicly.

**Objectives**

One of the objectives of the research is to provide a clearer account and analysis of one of the building blocks that goes to make up the complex picture of library provision during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, particularly for the working classes. It is often assumed that public libraries suddenly appeared following the 1850 Act; in reality, however, most library provision until late in the century was through other establishments, such as mechanics' institutes, working men's clubs and, of course, cooperative societies.

Another objective is to discover the reasons for the existence of cooperative society libraries instead of, and in some instances, alongside public libraries. The main reason for an alternative service may have been a economic one. Why should the rate payers fund a duplicate service? In the areas where both were provided, the reasons may not be as clear. Certainly a few cooperative society libraries offered a superior bookstock to the new public libraries, but they continued to thrive long after the public libraries had grown and developed. Were they providing a different service from the public libraries? As autonomous bodies, were they more keenly aware of their users' needs than their public counterparts? Or was there a more obscure reason?

Many cooperative society libraries continued well into the twentieth century, the longest surviving one finally closing its doors in 1971. Whatever the reason for their survival, it is worth considering whether current local authority library provision might benefit from looking at services from the past, such as those provided by cooperative societies to their members, in order to increase their usage and enhance their image within the community.

**Methodology and sources**

The methodology used in historical research is quite different from other types of research. Materials consulted have to be interpreted within the context of known facts. One of the main problems faced by researchers is having to rely on finding, examining and analyzing what has already been documented. Vital material will have been destroyed or lost over the years, then other material will lead the researcher

onto unexpected paths. In other words, historical research depends not only on history, but a great deal on chance as well. There is no tidy, predefined avenue to follow, no definite boundaries and limits; in fact, it is probably true to say that no 'historical researcher' will ever reach the point of claiming to have discovered everything there is to know about his subject.

This research is based mainly on an examination of both primary and secondary source material. Most primary source material is in the form of cooperative society records, for example letters and committee minute books. There are holdings of such material in County Record Offices, Archives Departments and Local Studies Departments of public libraries throughout the country. Sadly, many records have been lost, too often through neglect on behalf of the societies themselves during mergers with other societies, when staff have failed to realize the importance and significance of historical material.

Other Cooperative Movement materials play an important part in this research, including general books, individual society jubilee and centenary histories, annual reports from the Cooperative Congress and catalogues from cooperative society libraries themselves. Much of this specialized material is held at the Cooperative Union Library in Manchester. Appropriate serial literature, such as contemporary cooperative journals, magazines and local newspapers also provide an insight into the role of libraries and newsrooms, both within the Cooperative Movement and the lives of their users. An examination of general library history through books and periodicals sheds light on the role played by cooperative society libraries within the whole field of library provision generally.

The methodology used for the research includes a number of case studies of cooperative society libraries. Although societies throughout the country had libraries, the majority were situated in the North and North West of England, and for this reason I have confined the case studies to this area, particularly Lancashire and Yorkshire. It was my intention to select each case study for a particular reason - for instance the Rochdale Society had to be my first choice, because of its standing within the Cooperative Movement, Oldham and Bury Societies had quite substantial libraries with a network of newsrooms and small branch libraries, and Barnsley Society had the distinction of having the longest surviving library. However, good intentions are not always sufficient in the field of historical research, and the remaining case studies will probably have to be based on societies which just happen to have the most relevant records remaining intact, or at least complete enough for an objective study and analysis to be made.

**Conclusion**

The research is not yet complete, but there seem to be some general conclusions that can be made about the role of cooperative society libraries from the work already done.

The function of the cooperative society library appeared to change over time. The stock of the libraries during their early period supports the theory that it was primarily an educational tool - a means by which members could be made into more informed and therefore more effective cooperators. As the ability to read and write became more widespread amongst the working classes, the libraries turned towards the provision of reading material for leisure. The greatest period of growth for cooperative society libraries was between 1860 and 1880, when their number were greater than public libraries. This also reflects the period of most intense educational need amongst members.

However, to understand fully the role and purpose of libraries and newsrooms within the Cooperative Movement, it is necessary to understand the Cooperative Movement as a whole. For many people, the local 'Co-op' was not just a shop or store, it was a way of life. It looked after its members and their families from the cradle to the grave, and the 'dividend' provided a method of saving for more expensive items, or just much needed cash in times of financial difficulty.

The Cooperative Movement as a whole clearly played an important part in the development of the working classes during the period studied, whilst its contribution to education should not be underestimated or overlooked.

## References


1. Bonner, Arnold. British cooperation: the history, principles, and organization of the British Cooperative Movement. 2nd ed. Manchester: Cooperative Union, 1970, p55.

2. Holyoake, George Jacob. The history of cooperation. London: T Fisher Unwin, 1906, p647.

3. Barnish, Edwin. The cooperative libraries of Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Durham. In: Transactions and proceedings of the second annual meeting of the Library Association, Manchester 1879. London: Whittingham, 1880, p61.


## Use of diaries in library and information research


DEBORAH GOODALL
Centre for Research in Library and Information Management
University of Central Lancashire


"Only good girls keep diaries. Bad girls don't have the time"* - one reason perhaps why the diary has never really developed as a research tool in library and information science!

This article explores the limited use, and limitations on use, of the diary within the context of LIS research. The author is currently working on a BLRDD funded project**, examining library support for franchised courses in higher education, which is utilizing the diary method to record library use by students. A brief literature review, searching for examples of successful diaries and models of good practice, was not as informative as had been expected, so this discussion aims to highlight some useful sources. The author welcomes correspondence and would be pleased to receive further examples of diary surveys.

It is surprising that diaries are barely mentioned in several LIS methodology books (eg Busha[1], Salter[2]) and, apart from the Mass Observation[3] work established in the 1930s, there is relatively little discussion of diaries as a popular research method even in the sociology field. One author notes that "while there are a good number of literary diaries .. there still remains remarkable little sociological usage.[4] Ken Plummer[5] usefully delineates between three types of diary, namely the requested, the log, and the diary-diary interview, but is less helpful regarding their actual use. On the whole it would seem that diaries are best avoided. As a documentary source of data they are described of as being part of the "paper jungle" by Mann[6], writing from a sociological point of view, and Slater[7], taking more of an LIS approach, warns that being, as they are, simply recorded self-observations, "they will have been subjected to some systematization and editing by their creators, at the conscious or unconscious level." Ensuring reliability is a serious issue and it is advised that "(those) who use such documents have to ask themselves whether the evidence therein is authentic, whether it is complete, how representative it is of the experiences described, whether it is distorted by the personal bias of the writer, and why it was written."[8]

In the LIS arena Davis[9] gives a brief critical appraisal of the use of diaries in her 1971 article considering new approaches to studying library use. She comments "when fully and accurately maintained and analyzed, it provides the most specific data that can be found on user needs."[10] However there are doubts about the quality and quantity of data collected; ironically it is the busy respondent who is likely to be least accurate in recording details. Davis is one of the first of several writers to express concern that the analysis of the gathered data will be "difficult to accomplish."[11]

* *Attributed to Tallulah Bankhead*

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