Libraries were originally set up in Victorian times as a means of educating the masses and were regarded as working class institutions. They developed often from the Mechanics institutes, which were working class institutions established by the more affluent sections of the working class. When he proposed the Public Libraries Act, William Ewart presented the case for libraries as means for economic embetterment of the working classes (1). There was however a patronising element in public library provision as they were regarded as being for the working classes which lead them to being regarded as being akin to soup kitchens, baths and washhouses and some authors have regarded public library provision as a form of social control (2).

Returns from records of parliamentary returns for 1876-77 show predominantly working class readership (3) and, in the few case where sex and age were recorded, a substantial proportion of readers were young men and boys. By 1946 surveys started to show the readership as being young and middle class the late 1930’s this began to change and by 1962-63 surveys were showing an increasingly middle class membership (4) Kelly 383-386. Nowadays libraries tend to be used by a predominantly middle class female membership with heavy usage in the over 60’s. Children’s reading schemes are now being proposed to encourage boys reading

They are also being increasingly used for recreational reading with some authorities giving priority to satisfying demands for best sellers, promotional reads, chic lit, which in an era of scarce resources is competing with the educational and information role of libraries. My own analysis of issues in Waltham Forest suggest that the percentage of fiction books issued tended to be greater in the white middle class residential parts of the borough and the use of GCSE textbooks a lot lower suggesting that it was amongst the less affluent where there was a demand for the educational role of the library (5). However other factors may be involved such as age and ethnicity as there are a
considerably higher proportion of retired people in the residential areas. Also the
borough borders Essex and it may be that there is a lower proportion of
professional middle class people that in a lot of residential areas and a higher
proportion of small business owners, shopkeepers and managers in trades rather
than professionals that in part of West London.

In emphasising the role of lifelong learning we are effectively going back to the
future. In Victorian times there was an ethos of hope. Social reform was coming
with free education, the widening of the franchise and the growth of the trade
unions and cooperative movement. Social mobility was starting to occur and
gradually increased during the first eighty years of the twentieth century with
the reforms of the 1906 Liberal and 1945 Labour governments, the expansion of
higher education and the Open University. This continued until the Thatcher era
and the end of the Post War Consensus.

Since then social divisions have widened. Two areas in particular where social
mobility is restricted are housing and education. The introduction of student
loans and tuition fees has turned the clock back in higher education to the pre
war period where access was predominantly by people who could afford the fees.
Large numbers of people who could benefit from higher education will miss out
and there will be a need to access knowledge. There is a pressure for the return
to more selection in secondary education. Selection means increased opportunity
for some but exclusion for others. The 1944 education act did increase
opportunities for people from working class background and represented
progress but the number of grammar school places was usually less than the
number of people able to benefit from them. Comprehensive education was a
further expansion of opportunities. Bringing back examinations such as the
eleven plus will be a step backwards. Recently a report by Bristol University
concluded that working class children in Britain were less likely to climb the
social ladder than in any other developed nation (6). Never before has the role
of the library as the people’s university been more necessary.

Perhaps most importantly the library was one of the first forms of open learning
and has the potential to remain an open learning institution rather than
providing programmed learning for a production line educational system of
testing and cramming for exams.

However the role is under threat. There has been large-scale removal of stock
from shelves although this has not always been unjustified. In going through
some old stock in a store in a library in East London, I came across some books
that last issued before the Olympics last came to London. A lot of stock hadn’t
issued for years and its subject content was out of date but not everything.
There is a need for in depth coverage of subjects and in some fields particularly
the social sciences there are classic texts that provide evidence of social
conditions in the past such as the works of Booth and Mayhew or Margaret Mead
even if they are largely anecdotal theoretical texts such as Marx, Malthus and
Adam Smith. It is necessary to study social attitudes of the past to see where we
are going as ideas evolve. Fiction also provides an important record of social
attitudes and conditions in a way that official statistics can’t, as does oral
history.
We should be wary of adopting a censorial role particularly with works written a long time ago. Apart from anything else they can provide valuable insight into how views have evolved. Were we to put a total ban on anything racist or sexist then sacred texts such as the Bible and Koran would be prohibited and probably a lot of literature and the terminology used by Booker T Washington is no longer acceptable. Jack London held some repulsively racist views however People of the Abyss, which is an important account of conditions in East London and Iron Heel, is a dystopia written long before 1984. Banning Holocaust denial merely gives it credence. Holocaust deniers are about as plausible as Flat Earthers although arguably more dangerous but are they any more dangerous than evolution deniers. It is also necessary to have access to ideas to successfully challenge them. As George Santayana said, "Those who would forget the past are condemned to repeat it" (7).

A mass cull of stock is not the best way to bring about a renaissance of open learning. However a lot of the defenders of a traditional library service make a large mistake is to oppose computers in libraries. CDs, DVDs are arguably recreational features the Internet is not.

Information and knowledge is becoming increasingly available on line sometimes only available on line. If we fail to take this on board, libraries will gradually lose their informational role, and ultimately their educational role. Also unlike DVDs and CDs, computers should be a core service with basic access being free and open otherwise we are effectively placing taxes and barriers on knowledge. We do not demand residence for using a reference library so why demand it for the Internet? Charging should be for print outs, which should be treated, like photocopying for charging and for copyright purposes. This needs legislation, as there are still some local authorities where backwoodsmen have yet to realise that Internet charges are restricting access to knowledge. There is a danger of the Internet becoming the equivalent of libraries before the advent of open access.

Although I am arguing for a return to Victorian values I have a rather different view of them than Margaret Thatcher who failed to appreciate hat the Victorian age was one of reforms and municipalisation and collectivism and not a purely laisse fair approach and Samuel Smiles and self help. Lifelong learning is a form of self-help but of a more practical variety than the Samuel Smiles variety, which suggested that people could improve their lot by emulating the lives of famous people. Whilst a handful of people from working or lower middle class background undoubtedly could achieve fame and fortune they were the exception to the rule and were more likely to achieve it by an element of good luck and their own route rather than emulating others. There was however another form of self-help where groups or communities of people have combined to improve their conditions. Self help for people who like the American railroad brotherhood leader Eugene Debbs, want to rise with the ranks rather than from the ranks. In the nineteenth century there was the trade union movement, the coop and although they have now become banks and largely demutualised, the building societies. There were forms of self help provided by faith communities. There were also miner’s libraries in South Wales in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries (8). I would also not advocate seeking for funding from philanthropists as occurred in the nineteenth century. Whilst some benefactors such as Passmore Edwards appear to have been largely
philanthropic, others were more contentious. Andrew Carnegie who had initially claimed to support the rights of the working man appointed a union busting manager to run his steel mill in Homestead Pennsylvania resulting in a violent strike during which several people were killed whilst Henry Tate who funded the central library in Brixton, a branch library in Lambeth and provided the site for a library in Streatham did it from family fortunes that had been gained from slavery in sugar plantations. Communities should not have to rely on the favour of a handful of individuals however enlightened they may be for services.

In supporting lifelong learning, libraries can encourage self-help both for individuals and groups. For individuals libraries can provide means of increasing employability through books in preparing for interviews and CVs and through enhancing literacy and numeracy and IT skills. They can also provide materials for learning English as an additional language to facilitate the needs of migrant workers. The country of origin and levels of migration will vary but the need is likely to remain. It is important to emphasise the role of Open learning in that public libraries are essentially enablers rather than part of any formal teaching and that people can learn at their own pace. This is important in the age of performance monitoring that is turning the formal education into a production line through SATs and the national curriculum. There is a danger of programmed learning and concentration on examination technique reducing the capacity to think critically. This does not mean a laisse faire approach. We can still provide reading lists and promotions.

They can also be involved in collective self help through supporting groups such as Saturday Schools, homework clubs, tenants association and workers cooperatives. We should concentrate on addressing need for example readers groups unless they are reaching out to hard to reach groups are we merely providing a forum for middle class people to discuss books which they are likely to read anyway?

One area where libraries can assist in lifelong learning is through the traditional area of local history where local people can not only learn but also contribute to knowledge. Local history is traditionally seen as a largely white middle class activity but it needn’t. In the seventies labour history became increasingly recognised as a part of local history. More recently, authors such as Steve Martin and Peter Ashan have helped develop local black history. It is now sixty years since the arrival of the Empire Windrush and there are areas where there has been a black presence since the eighteenth century or even earlier. People from ethnic minorities will have made a considerable impact on local history in some communities in terms of changes in shops or places of worship and other areas. Many of the fine houses and gardens built during the eighteenth century and the development of some town were financed from the proceeds of the slave trade but this is often ignored or possibly even airbrushed by conventional local historians. The truth is out there and we can assist in the development of a holistic approach to local history.

Libraries also have an important role in bridging the digital divide through providing Internet access and other computer facilities. The internet provider John Carr described librarians as the “Heroes of the Internet Age” at a workshop at Unions 21 Although currently the book still has a major role and its demise is not imminent this may not always be the case. Will it still be so in the next
century? The Internet will however have an increasing role in the educational process.

Libraries will have to decide their priorities. If it is decided that their role is largely to provide recreational reading and become an appendage of the Richard and Judy book club competing with booksellers such as Waterstones they will attempt to compete for a largely middle class readership. This will help neither libraries nor the book trade and take us down the route to charging and tendering or even abolition, as they would be providing the kind of service that Colonel Sibthorpe thought libraries were providing. If it is decided that libraries have a predominantly educational role and they have a different function from bookshops both libraries and bookshops will benefit and can complement one another by different roles. Unlike a bookshop, a library can have the role of being the collective memory of a community, which is essential in supporting any open lifelong learning. We have a choice.

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