

Chapter 3

Donations to Libraries: A Problem in International Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

The donations of books and other materials to libraries in developing countries reveal the paradox that a gift can be more of a problem than a benefit. In the post-colonial period, well meaning organisations sent boxes of discarded books to libraries. Governments send book donations for propaganda purposes and religious organisations do likewise, with the Church of Scientology currently using its massive translating, publishing and distribution capacity for this purpose. Ways in which donations can be selected so as to serve the actual needs of recipients have been explored in recent years, with the charity Book Aid International being an outstanding example. The experience of libraries in the face of donations of all these types is discussed so as to point to some conclusions on the significance for international cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The author first became interested in the question of book donations to libraries more than 25 years ago whilst working in Botswana. Up until that time he had probably assumed that donations were a helpful way of stocking the libraries of poorer

countries, and that therefore they were a positive aspect of international cooperation. This view was turned upside down in a moment when during a visit to a rural public library in the north of the country he found on the shelves a copy of a book about the Severn bore. For those not acquainted with the phenomenon of the Severn bore, it occurs when the English river Severn temporarily flows back upstream under tidal pressure. Certainly the book was scholarly and inherently interest-

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ing. Yet how anyone could have imagined that it would be useful to supply, catalogue and shelve it in a library situated in one of the world's driest countries, at that time at least a year into a major drought, tests the power of the imagination. Ever since that moment of revelation, the author has turned a sceptical eye on the matter of donations. What follows represents the questioning approach that he afterwards adopted towards the issue as it affects developing countries. First we will look briefly at the history and background of donations to libraries, reviewing some of the recent literature on the topic in the process. That will be followed by a short overview of the methods and motivation of some of the major donor organisations, particularly in the light of the work of UNESCO's work on donations and a manual by Rosi (2005). The aspects of the issue raised by this will then be discussed before some conclusions are drawn.

DONATIONS: THE BACKGROUND

If we take a broad historical look at the question of donations we find that it has an enduring significance for libraries, but that significance has varied according to time and place. The centrality of donations to the growth and shape of libraries was a key factor in the age of the manuscript book and the early centuries of print. The Royal and Imperial libraries of Europe that mutated into National libraries, the Monastic, College and early Public Libraries all depended on foundation gifts and a continuing inflow of legacies and donations. Whilst a few libraries in the 16th and 17th centuries might have purchased a substantial part of their collections, most could only control the content of the library by encouraging some donations and (possibly) discouraging others. The 18th century commercial circulating libraries and libraries of private societies of one kind or another represent the first wave of libraries in which a proprietor, committee or librarian could, because of the revenue streams available, set out to exercise a

real command over the shape and content of the stock. The expectation that library collections should represent a coherent view of a subject or subjects was thus a comparatively new addition to the intellectual structure of librarianship when, in the 19th century, libraries of many kinds began to be founded in great numbers in the USA and north western Europe.

Melville Dewey and the pioneers of systematic librarianship acknowledged and respected the role of donations, but they envisaged the librarian exercising a conscious control over the process of collection building. This control is something that consistent and crippling under-funding has denied the librarians of the developing world. On the question of under-funding, Seth (2006)'s short and clear review of the Indian library system makes absolutely clear, what any visiting observer also discovers quite quickly, that 'Libraries are still the lowest priority in the decision-making process and there is no relation between the capacity of a state to spend on libraries and its willingness to do so'. Ghosh (2005) implicitly conveys a similar message. That this should be the case for the nation that produced Ranganathan and other significant thinkers of librarianship might be shocking, but the state of libraries in other parts of Asia, and in the African countries that the author knows rather better, is more than just shocking. Empty library shelves can be found in many places and where, in other cases, there are books on the shelves it is because those books are so completely unreadable as to actually repel readers. These books are usually donations.

To some extent they represent the efforts of governments (USA, France and other democracies today and socialist countries such as North Korea and Soviet Russia in the past) to spread their ideology and promote their influence. Religious bodies, publishers' organisations and others also follow the same trend. But probably worse was the unthinking 'kindness' of charitable organisations in richer parts of the world. This is especially true in the developing world where libraries have an

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