

FREEDOM TO READ

Librarian Discusses the Significance of Libraries

L. R. McCOLVIN, librarian of the City of Westminster, who has just visited New Zealand as a guest of the Government to look at our libraries (after making a similar visit to Australia), is a librarian with a bias towards the arts; has written (in addition to books for librarians) books with titles like "How to Find Out," "How to Use Books," "How to Enjoy Music," "How to Enjoy Plays"; has written several plays and contributed to library and musical periodicals (including musical criticism); is a member of the British Council; is fifty, but doesn't look it; and gives his recreations in "Who's Who" as "Music, anything connected with the theatre, walking, talking." The second-last of these he probably does at much the same speed as anyone else. The last he does at a great rate, with dazzling fluency.

WHEN *The Listener* interviewed Mr. McColvin, he had not yet seen the country—only Auckland, and its main libraries. But he had had time to decide that Auckland had by far the best municipal library service he had seen since he left Britain. In Australia, he said, New Zealand's libraries were held up as standards to aspire to.

Mr. McColvin spent three months in Australia, visiting all the States and Canberra, making a survey of library progress at the invitation of the Commonwealth and State Governments. On the journey from Britain, he had spent a month in the Middle East, looking chiefly at the libraries provided there by the British Council. And while he was in Australia, the New Zealand Government and Libraries' Association asked him to come here too. By the time this issue of *The Listener* is distributed, he will be in the United States, talking at Library Schools, and seeing what is going on in libraries there. His visit here was informal—"to make comments, but no report," as he put it.

Books and the Community

After praising Auckland's libraries, Mr. McColvin said: "Of course I've been told not to praise things too much here in case I stop further progress! But I think that's not fair. Now that they've 'gone free,' I think there's no serious criticism to be made. I was impressed to see that there's a definite attempt in Auckland to make the library a positive force in the community. Which is what it should be."

For one thing, Mr. McColvin says, a library can do a great deal in an active way to encourage the arts. The City of Westminster Library is in the heart of the art-dealing world in London, and the National, Tate, and South Kensington art galleries are all in Westminster. The library itself has a very large collection of music—about 25,000 to 30,000 items, and a big collection of miniature scores, which are much used by radio listeners and gramophone users, as well as concert-goers. Of the library's total holdings of non-fiction, 6 per cent. is music. And the library is just going to

start a gramophone record collection, at an estimated cost of about £2,000, for lending to groups, or in some cases to individuals.

"We propose to limit it to substantial works," Mr. McColvin said, "things people wouldn't buy for themselves—not just a collection of classical music that is in popular demand. We will let borrowers take them away, but we'll also probably make available a room that groups can use for listening on the premises if they want to. The idea is not new in Britain.

Pictures for Hospitals

"Derby County Library, for instance, has records, and pictures too—rather on the lines of these Carnegie collections you have here. The pictures are lent for longish periods for the walls of schools and hospitals and other buildings where the public go. And it's a very good way of getting art to the ordinary man."

"Has Britain a country library service, in the same degree as New Zealand?"

"Yes, but that kind of service is provided in Britain mainly by local government—of course I haven't seen your Country Library Service for myself yet. But in Britain there are County Councils that I should imagine are very different from anything you have in Australia or New Zealand. They may serve a population of anything from 200,000 to a million, and they work much the same system on a county basis as I am advocating on a State basis for Australia—a central headquarters supplying books both direct to individuals and also to scattered branches.

Minority Groups Are Important

"I believe you can't run small libraries solely on their own resources. If you have few books, and few

readers, your books are soon stale to the readers you have. You must have a large exchange stock, or else you will have books without readers and readers without books. And given that large exchange stock—which no small library can afford—the minority groups can get the books they want. For instance, the man who is interested in music, or astronomy, or bees, need not be limited to a small collection acquired in proportion to the size of the section of the reading public he represents.

"And those minority groups are very important. Because the ordinary man isn't interested in 'Reading.' He isn't interested in 'Books.' He's interested in some particular field, and it's that special interest that takes him into the library in the first place. So you must provide books that will tie up with those special interests.

"And that's the whole point of a free library service. If you want to use books to widen people's interests you can't start in a vacuum. Everyone reads something. And then that something leads him on to some other thing. But the old idea of charging for fiction stops him extending his interest like that. If you try to separate the categories in a library you lose the whole value of it as an educational force. A man shouldn't have to go to more than one place for the books he wants—with exceptions like lawyers, and doctors, of course. There should be an opportunity for him, once some special interest has taken him into a library, to move outward from that one interest, naturally and freely.

"A Library is Fundamental"

"What else can I talk about? UNESCO? Well, I'm a great believer in public libraries in the modern world. I
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LIONEL McCOLVIN
"You can't start in a vacuum"