

79 borough and town district libraries and 1 County Council library participating in this Service, and 3 more had decided to make the change and were waiting to do so at 31st March, 1948. The existing 80 free libraries affiliated with this Service serve a local population of 207,342 as well as a considerable number in their vicinity. In addition to the many specially requested books and periodicals, 28,550 books are on regular loan to them.

Secondment of one qualified library assistant to the Lower Hutt Municipal Library has continued.

During the period February, 1947, to March, 1948, 108 different communities received visits from a member of this staff. The purpose of making these visits was (1) to give information concerning free library service to those local authorities which had not adopted it; and (2) to give advice and assistance at those libraries which were operating on a free basis, and at the same time to assess the value of the service given locally.

There are now only 25 boroughs within the 500–15,000 population group which are not giving or about to give free library service. Of these, 4 have no library service at all. In the inauguration of a library these 4 local authorities face the problem of providing an initial book collection and of finding suitable accommodation. In spite of this, however, it is thought that in many ways it will be an advantage in these towns not to be hampered by the old subscription-library tradition.

Those local authorities which are not providing a full and free library service do not realize the importance of its provision as a function of local government. Unfortunately, the type of service given under the subscription method has fostered a false impression of what a library service can be. There is hardly a subscription library in New Zealand which has a range of books wide enough to satisfy the demands of more than a very small proportion of the population, and few subscription libraries attempt to give more than a superficial information service. In general, and by its very nature, the subscription system in the smaller towns can do little more than provide popular fiction and best-seller favourites.

If local authorities had a clearer picture of the kind of service which could be given and the value it would have for the community, there would be little hesitation in voting money for it. Expenditure on a good service is justified when it is used by the whole community, whereas the subsidizing of a fiction service given to a small proportion of the population should not be condoned.

Concern has been felt at the number of library authorities affiliated with this Service which have done little or nothing to develop a service of worth-while reading on a free basis. The building-up of a useful non-fiction stock has been overlooked in all but a few cases. Too often the library's free fiction collection consists of worn books which have passed through the rental collection. While the rental collection has a proper place in an otherwise free library where the authority wishes to give a service of light entertainment reading without strain on public funds, it should always be subordinated to a free collection kept fresh with new and physically attractive stock. This free collection should contain the useful books which contribute to the well-being of the community (popular technical books, especially those dealing with home life or subjects such as gardening, dressmaking, house-planning, &c.), books which keep people in touch with current national and international trends, together with good imaginative works, including art, poetry, drama, and the best fiction. A service of such books cannot be provided by any commercial agency, yet a community without them is impoverished. It is a public service which must not be reduced to a charity.

Unfortunately, it has become increasingly apparent that no library authority can give this sort of publicly valuable service unless it employs a librarian trained to know the whole range of books and periodicals which can be of use to a particular community, and trained to be master of the complicated but essential techniques through which they can be brought to the attention of those who will use them. The resources of this Service are not fully used in those libraries which do not employ such suitable people.