

local residents who, if they are readers, have long since read all they want. Outside of these there is practically no public library service at all. In the less densely settled districts the residents are completely unprovided for.

This very unsatisfactory condition is almost analogous to that existing in Great Britain twenty years ago. The inauguration of the English county system under the Act of 1919 found certain towns, in fact all the larger municipalities, already provided with libraries. The problem was to give a book service to the country districts, the small towns, and new centres. To achieve this object the counties, as the existing educational authorities, were empowered—but not required—to establish county libraries. They had to begin *de novo*, omitting the existing library districts, however small, and ignoring the great resources of libraries already established within the towns. Headquarters, buildings, book-stock, and personnel had to be acquired without regard to the resources already in the area. Unless they chose to come in voluntarily, the small-town libraries were left out. The headquarters of the county library was established in the county town, in some cases not far from an existing library; and the county town was not necessarily the largest centre in the county.

The success of the English county system of libraries has been remarkable. Colonel J. M. Mitchell, Secretary of the United Kingdom Carnegie Trustees, in his introduction to the Statistical Report on County Libraries, 1934–35, says,—

“I can hardly believe that the total issues have risen from a few hundred thousands in the pioneer counties to nearly fifty millions in fifteen years, with a total stock of 5,500,000 books and a reading public of over two million who, broadly speaking, had no library service before.

“All this represents a great change in the opportunities enjoyed by members of village and small urban communities; and alongside it there have developed other cultural services—village halls, rural community councils, rural drama and music clubs on a large scale, young farmers’ clubs and many other humanizing agencies. I do not think it is too much to claim that the county library movement has in certain respects shown the way to these and other movements, and that it is now an ancillary service of primary importance.”

Thus the county library system in England has made great strides towards the objects of a rural library service as set forth in the report of the Departmental Committee on Education (G.B.) in 1927, *i.e.*,—

“To relieve the tedium of idle hours quite irrespective of intellectual profit or educational gain. It is sufficient to satisfy this purpose that the rural inhabitant should be rendered a happier—and not necessarily a more learned—man by the provision which is made for him. To enable the rural inhabitant to acquire without difficulty that general knowledge which alone can enable him to appreciate to the full what he sees and hears. To remove as far as possible all obstacles from the path of the serious student of any subject.”

There are variations of the county system in the United States, particularly in California, the State which provided the most successful experiment upon which the English system was based. There are features also in the State-supported systems of various European countries and of Australia, which promise to be helpful in solving New Zealand’s problem.

A most important point that emerges from a study of various systems is stressed by Messrs. Munn and Barr, that in devising an improved library service for New Zealand full advantage ought to be taken of existing library resources and of the experience of the trained librarians in the Dominion. The financial resources of the Dominion will not permit us to attempt to create a rural library service *de novo*—both books and personnel—thus duplicating much of the foundation book-stock and failing to utilize the all-too-limited trained personnel of the New Zealand library service. It would be a grave dissipation of resources in books and money to set up such a dual system; it would inevitably cause a permanent and wasteful duplication of effort. To avoid that we should, if possible, overcome at the very outset some of the problems which faced the English pioneers twenty years ago, and endeavour to arrange that all existing libraries within a district shall be brought into co-operation and the general book-stock most advantageously employed.

THE LIBRARY DISTRICT.

While the general features of the English county system seem capable of being successfully employed in New Zealand, certain radical variations are recommended by experience. Firstly as regards the unit of organization. In England the county has always been the educational authority. Library service is to a great extent adult education, and the Education Committee of the English County Council was automatically entrusted with the administration of the new systems. Moreover, the average population of a county was sufficiently large to ensure economical working. In New Zealand conditions are quite different. No one of our counties has a population sufficiently large to support a library service on an economical financial basis. An aggregation of counties would be essential so as to give a population sufficiently large to constitute an economical “district.”

The size and character of the library districts would require to be very carefully studied. Practice in Great Britain and the United States demonstrates that if a district is unduly small it cannot be economically operated. In Great Britain there are six county systems serving populations of over 500,000 each; twelve serving from 250,000 to 500,000