

Sir Maurice O'Rorke; an incidental champion of Auckland libraries

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Abstract

Auckland Provincial Councillor and Onehunga MP Sir Maurice O'Rorke played a major role in the proliferation of small libraries in the Auckland provincial area during the late nineteenth century. He was responsible for the researching and drafting of New Zealand library legislation. O'Rorke saw himself as an educationalist, and his diaries and notebooks, and New Zealand Parliamentary debates (Hansard) reveal that he perceived public libraries as a logical extension to the provision of universal education in New Zealand. The debates recorded in Hansard show why library legislation was given an easier passage through the New Zealand Parliament than was the case in Britain.

O'Rorke's credentials

George Maurice O'Rorke was born in Ireland in 1830, the third son of Rev. John O'Rorke. He graduated from Trinity College in 1852 with a BA with honours in Classics, and emigrated to the goldfields of Victoria. In 1854 he came to Auckland with Henry Taylor, who later became the first secretary and Inspector of Education for Auckland. O'Rorke bought property and farmed in Papakura and Onehunga. In 1857 he was appointed by John Williamson, then the Superintendent of the Province of Auckland, as Clerk of the Auckland Provincial Council where he served until 1865 when he was elected as a Councillor and served as the Speaker until 1876. O'Rorke was Deputy Superintendent under Williamson and in 1875 until the appointment of Governor George Grey he stood in as temporary Superintendent of Auckland. In 1860 he became the MP for Onehunga in the General Assembly. In 1868 O'Rorke was admitted to the bar under an Act that permitted graduates to become barristers and solicitors merely by passing an examination. In 1870 he was elected the Chairman of Committees in the House of Representatives, a position to which he was appointed several times before he became Speaker of the House in 1879. O'Rorke served in the General Assembly until 1902,

and in 1904 was elected on to the Legislative Council where he served until 1916.



Sir Maurice O'Rorke

New Zealand historian Keith Sinclair described O'Rorke as an extremely stubborn man with a determination to get his own way. Sinclair saw him as a prominent but not front ranking politician who had a way of making his views known by his resonant Irish voice. English politician Charles Trevelyan, who met O'Rorke in 1898, described him as a first-rate speaker with a serious failing in his addiction to the bottle. He stated that when O'Rorke was noted as "ill" from parliament he often could be "found in the back parlours of public houses, watched over by a judicious attendant who interferes if he begins to disclose state secrets."¹ Addicted or not, O'Rorke had an unswerving attachment to Auckland: an attachment so strong and

protective that a grievance over the abolition of the provinces, and the consequential loss of political power for the area, caused him to resign his post in the Vogel cabinet.

O'Rorke was first and foremost an educationalist. His contribution to early New Zealand education was so outstanding that he received a knighthood in 1880. By 1890 he had ensured that Auckland won the battle over the siting of the University of New Zealand, and had safeguarded the Auckland Provincial Council library by supporting its inclusion into the newly

formed Auckland Public Library. He was Chairman of the Board of Governors at Auckland Grammar School, a member of the Senate of the New Zealand University, and Chairman of the Auckland University College. His interest in the advancement of libraries was a consequence of his conviction in the need to provide universal education in New Zealand.

The drafting and passing of New Zealand Library legislation

Ten years after Britain adopted William Ewart's Public Library Act (1850) O'Rorke began to research the impact of the Act on the British education system. He believed that the adoption of similar legislation would see a rise in educational levels in the colony. His notebooks state that he "read all I could lay my hand on espousing the subject. It appeared to me a measure which would serve this colony—I accordingly having carefully studied the various acts then in existence, some half a dozen in number, drew [up] the New Zealand Act of 1869"² in a bid to confer on the New Zealand public the "same privileges which similar bodies enjoyed at home."³ His New Zealand Public Libraries Bill was introduced later that year.

Because he was a member of the General Assembly, O'Rorke needed to gain the support of a member from the Legislative Council to have his legislation introduced. He chose William Gisborne, the MP for Egmont, to take charge of this "permissive" bill. In his opening statement Gisborne reminded his fellow parliamentarians of the impact of the parliamentary library on their own self-improvement, and suggested that there was no better way to benefit the education of New Zealanders than by ensuring they too had access to libraries. This statement was greeted by an aggressive response from William Nurse, the MP for Southland, who suggested that the books purchased in public libraries would not be of a high enough quality that the public would be happy to be taxed for them. Nurse's argument over the provision of suitable literature was indicative of a presumption that the middle class should dictate the genre suitable for working class readers

Gisborne argued that there had been a change of philosophy in Britain over the censorship of books. He stated that books on theology and politics, which had been taboo for the working class reader, were now becoming less restricted. He cited Lord John Russell's speech at a public meeting in 1855, which argued that there should be "free circulation of truth and error."⁴ After a long philosophical discussion, stemming more from a belief in the need for stronger social controls

than from concerns over financial obligations, the Act was passed.

It was to be several decades before any local authorities implemented the Act to levy a library tax. James Traue claims that New Zealand had a "tradition of strong [national] government and weak local government,"⁵ during this period, resulting in a continuation of subscription libraries and "a minimum and substantially user-pay public library coverage to small and scattered populations."⁶ Although O'Rorke had failed to help establish the free public library model in New Zealand, he had highlighted the need for local and central government intervention in library provision.

In 1874 the Auckland Provincial Council (APC) received complaints from several library committees about problems caused by lack of legal recognition of their libraries or societies, and a consequent inability to enforce library rules and by-laws on their members. On 13 May 1875 the Council established a Select Committee to Report on Country Libraries. O'Rorke was on the Committee. Their brief was to examine problems experienced by country libraries and report back to the Council the following week. The subsequent report stated that the question of ownership of books was the major problem and that once this was addressed, all other problems should be resolved.

In response, O'Rorke drew up the 1875 Public Libraries Powers Bill. Introducing it to the House, he informed members that he had examined the Imperial Statutes about the legality issue, but that no precedent could be found. After examining some North American laws he had found an act which could be adapted to suit the New Zealand situation. The Bill aimed to give libraries the power to accept donations and endowments and empower them to enforce their by-laws. Libraries would become legal entities by registration in the courts. Outstanding debts and fines owed to libraries could then be collected through the courts. O'Rorke used this opportunity to espouse his beliefs on the role of the library as a provider of education. He argued that the library provided a place where "the youth of the colony, after they had passed from their schools, might continue their education, and thereby arrive at a higher attainment than would have been without such a means as public libraries afford."⁷ Unfortunately O'Rorke still failed to specify municipal responsibility to place libraries on a secure financial footing.

On 9 August 1877 O'Rorke presented a motion to the House requesting the appropriation of £5000 to aid

the country's libraries. He indicated that a government subsidy would preserve the funding base that had already been established by the Provincial Councils. On 15 August he told the House that "it was an undoubted fact that the public libraries at Home were a boon to the working classes."⁸ Hugh Murray Aynsley,⁹ the MP for Lyttleton, agreed with O'Rorke's contention, stating that there was a real need for government intervention to ensure free libraries. He stated that he was concerned that the subscription-based library system was based on class, and that only those who could afford membership had access to the entire library. The general public, he said, had limited access to reference items only.

To implement the funding of libraries Edward Wakefield introduced a third Public Libraries Bill on 26 September 1877. In the House he stated that the object of the bill was to "provide the machinery by which libraries which were in existence under the provincial system might be continued,"¹⁰ namely the means to distribute the subsidies. Wakefield proclaimed that the 1869 Act had proved so useless that he had included a clause in the bill that would repeal it. He had however, changed his mind since presenting the bill, and had decided to remove the clause when the bill was in committee.

O'Rorke responded that he felt it was premature to repeal the 1869 Act and suggested that although the object of the new bill was "a laudable one - namely, to give permanent support to libraries in country districts - and he thought its proper designation should be the Country Libraries Act."¹¹ Section 2 of Wakefield's bill specified that the Education Boards would distribute the funds, a clause that would later cause a great deal of dissension in Parliament. Another significant section was Section 4 which, for the first time, included a statutory definition of a public library.¹² The Act was passed, and in 1878 the first subsidies were paid out to New Zealand country libraries.

Funding for libraries in Auckland

Libraries, or at least the Mechanics' Institute and Reading Room, had been applying to the APC for financial aid since the early 1850s. In 1856 the Council had allocated £300 to the construction of a new hall, and intermittent funding followed. The first allocation of funding for a "public" library in Auckland from the Council is recorded in January 1864, when a sum of £50 was put in the estimates for the Mahurangi library for "the purchase of agricultural works."¹³ The motion to fund the library was only passed by the speaker's

vote. An application from the Waipu library at the same meeting for £25 was turned down. Clearly there were matters far more pressing than libraries to be addressed by the Council.

Between 1871 and 1875 over 50 libraries received grants from the Council. This money was allocated purely for the purchase of books. Over a five-year period over £200 per annum was distributed to "country" libraries. Most received a seeding grant of about £10, which was followed by an annual grant of two to five pounds.

AUCKLAND PROVINCIAL COUNCIL FUNDING ALLOCATIONS AND SUBSIDIES TO COUNTRY LIBRARIES, 1871-1875.

1871	£155.15.0	19 libraries	539 books
1872	£249.17.6	30 libraries	785 books
1873	£250.0.0	33 libraries	-
1874	£300.0.0	44 libraries	-
1875	£22.16.0	-	-

Ref: *Journals of the Auckland Provincial Council, 1872-1874*, B- Distribution of the Vote in Aid of Libraries in Country Districts.

In 1874, three years after granting subsidies to libraries, the APC sent out a circular to the region's libraries requesting information on "the Titles, and present condition of Books granted to [the] Library out of the Votes of the Provincial Council in aid of Country libraries."¹⁴ Libraries were asked to "specify which of the said books have been most called for."¹⁵ The circular generated replies from 40 libraries, replies which indicated that many of the "libraries" had a very limited number of books. The Titirangi library claimed to have purchased 35 books with their grant and had a membership of 12. Onchunga, on the other hand, had a membership of 40 and had purchased 850 books with their £27.10s grant. Both Te Awamutu and Tauranga claimed 64 members and had received £20.

In the circular, a suggestion was made about the interchange of stock between libraries. This idea was greeted with a strongly negative response. Te Arai librarian Charles Haseldin declared that "I would not advocate the interchange of books with other libraries some people are so dirty in their habits and have so little regard for books that I should be afraid to put any belongings of other libraries into their hands."¹⁶ The suggestion seems to have gone no further.

Why the circular was distributed can only be speculated upon. It may have been instigated by the increased publicity about the "fiction nuisance" in

Britain's libraries. The Council may have wanted to ensure that the correct type of material was being purchased with its money. It could have been purely an attempt to prevent duplication of book stock, or even a desire to see the establishment of circulating library loans similar to those found in Britain. The files containing the responses provide no answers to the rationale behind the circular.

In 1878, after the passing of the 1877 Public Libraries Subsidies Act, the Auckland region received over £1000 between 49 libraries in the first pay out from the government. Between 1878 and 1886 government subsidies were granted annually to New Zealand libraries.

Government ideology behind library provision

The debates that occurred each year when the question of library subsidies was raised in the House, were often prolonged and angry. Analysis suggests that the majority of politicians continued to see the role of the library as a vehicle of control, an institution for the public good. They believed that the country's young people had too much time on their hands and therefore needed libraries to take them away from hotels and wasteful use pursuits. Young men hanging around street corners could better spend their time listening to debates or reading approved books.

The proceedings of the Auckland Provincial Council and the debates within the General Assembly are invaluable in determining local and central responses to library development. Discussions on whether it was the role of the library to entertain or educate exposed a rift between the North and South. Suggestions that some southern libraries purchased too much fiction were addressed by Seymour T. George, the member for Rodney, who stated "whatever might be the case in the South ... That was not so in other parts of the Colony, and particularly the North, where they looked for scientific and useful works. They did not choose novels, but preferred to read agricultural, historical, and scientific works."¹⁷

W.M Green argued that many youths had no home fireside to look forward to in the evening and were driven out into the streets for company. He stated that "if there was no places lighted, warm, and pleasant, and in which there was congenial society, and books which they could read and thus improve their minds, they could only expect that these youth would roam the streets and give expression to the exuberance of their animal spirits in some way that would violate the law ..."¹⁸

Conclusion

Sir Maurice O'Rorke's reasons for fostering the establishment of libraries differed from those of many of the members of parliament who supported his bill.

LIBRARIES WHICH RESPONDED TO AUCKLAND PROVINCIAL COUNCIL CIRCULAR FEBRUARY 1874

Library	Membership numbers	Financial status	Stock numbers	No. of books from APC	Grants received APC
	1874				
Alexandra	43	25.16.0	105	72	27.16.6
Arai	14	4.4.0	567	68	22.10.0
Bombay	24	12.0.0	102	68	22.10.0
Cambridge				83	20.7.6
Devonport	33	8.5.0.	193	60	15.0.0
Hamilton	72	70.0.0	209	96	27.11.0
Kaitiaia	72	70.0.0	209	96	27.11.0
Kaukapakapa	17	8.10.0	160	32	17.10.0
Kawakawa	31	41.16.8	350	45	17.10.0
Kirktown	33	9.18.0	360	99	20.0.0
Mahurangi	21	6.6.0	600	68	27.10.0
Maketu	38	6.6.0	150	68	27.10.0
Mangawai	12	3.0.0	237	44	10.0.0
Matakana	24	5.0.0	246	98	30.0.0
Matakohe	35	1.10.0	377	75	15.0.0
Maungataroto N.Z.	21	4.5.6	299	30	7.10.0
Agricultural Society	101		26	17	15.0.0
Ngaruawahia				70	20.0.0
North Shore	33		193	60	
Omaha	12	6.0.0	184	61	15.0.0
Onehunga	40	24.0.0	850	88	27.10.0
Opotiki	51	25.10.0	125	38	7.10.0
Otara	10	2.0.0	332	18	5.0.0
Papakura	28	6.17.6	279	121	30.0.0
Paparoa	26	1.6.0	172	91	17.10.0
Patumahoe	24	6.0.0	142	78	20.1.6
Port Arthur	40	12.0.0	450	87	27.10.0
Pukekohe East	26	6.12.6	100	36	10.0.0
Raglan	12	13.10.0	74	48	20.0.0
Tauranga	64	60.0.0	425	42	20.0.0
Te Awamutu	64	60.0.0	425	42	20.0.0
Titirangi	14		35		
Wade	23	23.10.0	180	50	14.16.0
Waipu	30	7.10.0	127	90	27.10.0
Waiuku	22	12.0.0	515	87	27.10.0
Whangarei	43	25.10.0	641	95	30.0.0
Whangaroa North				48	15.0.0
Wharehine	11	2.16.0	147	24	17.10.0
Whau	25	12.10.0	275	29	7.10.0

Ref: Auckland Provincial Council. Libraries; answers from various libraries re circular, MS 595 Box 25/27, APL.

While many MP's supported public library legislation because they believed that the library could be utilised for public good and social control, O'Rorke's aim was to promote universal education. He believed that, for those unfortunate in having to leave school at an early age, the library would provide salvation. Within the library they could continue to learn and develop their education while supporting their families. In a speech

