

# *Merely boxes of books?*

## *The management and administration of Auckland's nineteenth-century libraries*

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the proliferation of small libraries in the Auckland provincial area during the later part of the nineteenth century: specifically, the 1870s when the New Zealand public library legislation was introduced. It describes how the management and administrations behind the establishment of many of Auckland's small libraries conformed to a common methodological pattern. The organizational history and the ideology of founders and library committees was recorded in extraordinary detail in the dozens of library minute books and newspapers accessible in the region's libraries today. These resources verify that behind the establishment of each library was a group of civic-minded individuals who saw libraries as a vehicle for promoting community improvement. The desire to be seen as a civilised society within an unstable and harsh colonial environment was demonstrated in the rapid expansion of institutions of permanence, such as schools, churches and libraries.

### **Introduction**

To examine the history of Auckland's early libraries it was necessary to re-evaluate what constituted a library. While a contemporary definition of a library would most likely be that it was "a collection of graphic materials arranged for relatively easy use, cared for by an individual or individuals familiar with that arrangement, and available for use by at least a limited number of people"<sup>1</sup> this notion was not true for the early colonists. A library in nineteenth century Auckland was merely a collection of books, which could number from as few as a dozen titles to well over a thousand. Libraries were lodged in boxes, bookshelves (or presses), and were housed in church vestries, public halls, schoolrooms, and on rare occasions they were located in a "library" building.

### **The motivation behind the establishment of Auckland's libraries**

In the wake of the 1877 Public Libraries Subsidies Act there was a huge influx of registrations to establish libraries formally under the 1875 Public Libraries Powers Act. Once a library was registered it could benefit from the subsidies being distributed under the 1877 Public Libraries Subsidies Act. Many of the libraries that registered had already been in existence for many years. Others jumped on the bandwagon in

the hope of being part of the distribution process.

In the Auckland province the Opatiki Mechanics' Institute was the first library to register on 27th September 1878.<sup>2</sup> Over one hundred others had followed by 1919. The deeds of registration are housed at the National Archives in Auckland and provide data on the occupational background of many of those who established libraries in the province. These documents, and extracts from local histories, library records and minute books, and copies of the Rules and By-laws which governed each institution make it possible to construct a profile of the breed of "men" who were the driving force behind the proliferation of the country's early libraries.

Many of those who were listed in the deeds of registration as founders of libraries already enjoyed a high profile in their community. Using Paul Husbands' occupational categorisation<sup>3</sup> it was possible to establish a class structure within the composition of the 116 library committees. The committees were made up from: 176 businessmen and professionals, 43 "white collar" workers, 125 small businessmen, 114 tradesmen, 23 semi-skilled workers, 67 unskilled workers, and 613 miscellaneous and unspecified (this group includes those listed as settlers and farmers, and women). The 37 women listed have

been designated as miscellaneous and unspecified as their occupational status was consistently absent, but an examination of the backgrounds of some of the women listed has shown that a substantial number were either the postmistress or were connected to a local school. Susanah Cullen of Maungataroto was one of the few women who listed her occupation. She designated herself as a farmer.

In *Recollections of Early Pioneering Days*, L. Hames suggests that life was extremely difficult for the literary gentlemen of the rural areas because "some, educated and cultured [men] accustomed only to civilised life, [found themselves] shut out from the artistic and the literary, shut in to dead monotony and dead levelness"<sup>4</sup> in the isolated new townships. To relieve this monotony many turned to letter writing and debating societies. Keith Sinclair confirms that one of the chief occupations of the literate members was writing letters and pamphlets. "The level of public debate was very high indeed, in spite of the indulgence of personalities ... The writing and publication of diaries might well be described as an industry. Most of the best New Zealand books were of this nature, being reminiscences or more or less personal accounts of the colony."<sup>5</sup>

The Athenaeum Literary and Debating Societies Union and Auckland Union Parliament annual pamphlet<sup>6</sup> lists dozens of Mutual Improvement Societies that were established throughout the inner city and outer suburbs during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Many of these societies had their own small libraries that later became the basis of the public library. Mr B.M. Gubb recalled the "the mental culture of Port Albert was forwarded by a Mutual Improvement Society, quite unique, prosperous and popular among the young people, bearing the name for years of the Saturday Half-Holiday Club, combining sport in the afternoon, a social tea and literary recreation in the evening."<sup>7</sup> He suggested that the organisation prospered for many years aided by the early establishment of the public library. Gillespie-Needham suggests that it was necessity rather than a desire to seek cultural change which "occasionally provided the impetus for the establishment of mutual improvement societies"<sup>8</sup> and libraries. She gives as an example an excerpt from a *Daily Southern Cross* in June 1870, where a society was founded because of the unsatisfactory selection of books on gardening in the province. Gillespie-Needham also suggested that societies were more "inclined to develop amongst the

nonconformist settlers such as the Albertlanders."<sup>9</sup>

Related to the desire for self improvement and intellectual stimulation was a need to keep abreast with world news. An advertisement in Chapman's 1872 Auckland Almanac lists of over thirty British monthly periodicals available for sale within New Zealand.<sup>10</sup> Most reading rooms disseminated a selection of at least four or five overseas periodicals or papers, along with several local papers, most of which were provided free to members. The Newton Literary Association stated that its reading room was "supplied with the daily local papers, [as well as the] *Home News*, *Illustrated London Times*, *Fun*, *Punch*, *London Society* and a number of other papers and periodicals."<sup>11</sup>

Local newspapers indicate that there was a common pattern in the establishment of country libraries. Generally an advertisement was placed in the local newspaper to evaluate the level of public interest, advertising a public meeting to discuss the establishment of a public library. These meetings were well attended because it was also a chance to get together and reaffirm community bonds. A vote to go ahead and establish a library meant that a library committee would be voted in immediately. Their brief was to not only to find the books to start the collection, but also to draw up rules and by-laws to govern such an institution, to locate a suitable building, to find donations and funding, as well as providing a "librarian" to open the "library".

Most committee members donated one or two books to start the collection. These were often generally well-thumbed titles. An appeal would then be made to those in the community with financial resources, which in many cases produced another 20 or so books. Whether the books were discards or books that were considered to be necessary to a library is unclear in library minutes. There seemed to be a general feeling that the contributors were being very generous and readers should appreciate anything that they could get their hands by way of reading material.

The manner in which the constitutions, by-laws, rules and regulations were drawn up often reveals a great deal about the backgrounds of the people who wrote them. While some libraries devised a small list of rules to ensure the smooth running of their organisation, others wrote vast numbers, often as many as thirty. These covered everything from the expected behaviour in the library to the rules of membership and duties of the Executive Committee.

Setting the fees, fines and an abundance of rules for just handling the books was a job taken very seriously by the newly appointed committees.

It could be suggested that the occupational imbalance of most library committees meant that the library was not in tune with the real needs of the people. But Phyllis Dain suggests that just because "an 'elite' started and governed public libraries does not mean that ordinary people did not want them or could not make good use of them."<sup>12</sup> For those who established the country library their main desire was to see an institution of prestige in their own community. The rigid rules and regulations they devised were deemed necessary to carry out the public trust in the administration of public institutions.

### Library opening hours

Carried along on a tide of enthusiasm for their project, many library committees would open the library for long hours. In some cases a library was open all day when it held as few as 20 or 30 donated books and an odd assortment of periodicals from "Home". It was not long before realistic hours were offered, such as in Wairoa South where the library opened for two hours a week, on Saturday between 2 and 4pm. The Turanganui Library, in Gisborne, opened after dinner on Monday and Wednesday between 7 and 9pm and on Saturday between 2 and 5pm and 7 and 9pm. At Maungakaremea the library by-laws cited that the library would be opened "monthly on the Saturday preceding the full moon, or the Saturday on which the full moon falls at 7 o'clock".<sup>13</sup> This enabled library members to get to and from the library safely by the light of the moon. At Warkworth the library was open on Thursdays from 12.30 - 1p.m. for "the accommodation of the settlers". This was later extended to coincide with the departure of the steamer from Auckland.

### Remuneration

Untrained and unskilled in librarianship, the Library Committees ran the libraries as well as they could. More often than not the treasurer or secretary often filled the role of unpaid librarian. It seems that few of these "librarians" were compensated for the hours they worked. Some institutions had funds to pay for services. The Whangarei Literary Institute, for example, paid £5 towards the rent and the librarian's salary. From the minutes it is unclear how many hours

were worked. In 1872 the Institute advertised its hours as 9am - 10pm, but it can be assumed that the librarian was not expected to work those long hours for a mere £5. Maungakaremea paid its librarian, Mr Boniface, a salary of £2 10s, plus free reading, to open the library every Saturday between 2 and 5 p.m. The Kaitia Public Library voted in its first female librarian on 8 November 1884. Miss Alice Matthews was paid £1 per year. There was no reference in the minute books to the hours she was expected to work.

The Thames library's handsome remuneration for the librarian's job included accommodation as part of the salary package. The librarian's living quarters consisted of a wooden building with four rooms. Two of these were the library and reading room. On top of this salubrious accommodation was the salary of £69 18s 9d per year. It is interesting to note the size of the building being offered to members. The Circulating Library was in a room 31ft by 10ft and the Reading Room a larger 31ft by 29ft.<sup>14</sup> At Warkworth, when the Mahurangi librarian's job was opened for tenders they accepted the lowest tender for £6 10s from Nathaniel Wilson Jnr, for several hours work per week.

### Job description

During this period the librarian was clearly seen as purely a custodian of the books. The by-laws of the Tauranga Mechanics' Institute cite the role of the librarian as "the Librarian shall ... keep open the Reading Room during such hours as the Directors may appoint to keep lighted as many room as may be required to see that they are properly cleaned to issue and receive books to make catalogue and collect and receive subscriptions fines etc and to pay them over to the Treasurer and to perform such duties as the Directors may deem necessary."<sup>15</sup>

Apart from receiving subscriptions and issuing a few books, the only "library" skill required was the intermittent production of a catalogue. In most libraries this entailed listing books in numerical order. On some occasions they were divided into very broad subject headings. An examination of catalogues published during the 1870s shows that most catalogues failed to include the correct title or author details. There were few essential bibliographical details such as the year, publisher or place of publication. In many cases all that was specified was the title, which often spoke for itself such as *Curious facts from old colonial days, Rural and city life, or, the Fortunes of the Stubble family* or *Life and Sports in*

### *South Eastern Africa.*

After the librarian assembled a "catalogue" of the library holdings it was distributed to members and potential borrowers at a small cost. There are still many copies of these elegantly printed library catalogues in existence in archives around the country. Although they provide clues to the reading habits of the library committees they are not necessarily guides to the reading preferences of the other library members.

### **Subscription rates**

The honour of belonging to a library could cost a member between five shillings and twelve pounds annually. Often libraries had to cut their fees into quarterly or half-yearly instalments to accommodate members. Settlers lead such transient lives that they often paid only a quarterly subscription before they moved on. The issuing of new books in many libraries was done by a ballot system to ensure fair distribution. At Waipu the first reader was required to place a brown paper cover around the book to ensure its protection, and the item was issued for seven days before being handed onto the next member listed. Late return of items was frowned upon and often a hefty fine imposed. At Matakana any member lending a book belonging to the library to other readers was fined one shilling.

Visitors to many towns were able to use the local reading room, and in some cases were able to borrow books. The Mahurangi library asked that a deposit of one pound be paid by "any person not being a settler in the District."<sup>16</sup> Part of the money collected went towards the librarian's salary of three pounds per annum.

### **Book selection**

Book selection was always the sphere of the library committee or the Executive. The Committee made up lists of "appropriate" titles and after prolonged debate several choices were made. In some libraries members could fill out a suggestion book for titles they felt the library should purchase. It is interesting to note that as late as 1902, the Auckland City Librarian, Edward Shillington, still had to present lists of titles to the Auckland City Council for approval.<sup>17</sup>

The selection of stock seems to have been a haphazard affair in most libraries. Lack of funds precluded any systematic attempts at collection development. Although most members paid

subscriptions the amount could not hope to cover the replacement and expansion of stock. An example of the methodology used by many committees to select books was highlighted in the minute books at Lower Matakana. For book selection the committee was instructed to "strike out the most expensive books from the lists and order the remainder from the bookseller who would supply them at the lowest price."<sup>18</sup>

Government subsidies depended on the number of subscribers in each area. While some libraries record long lists of annual purchases, others spent their government allocation frugally, holding money over for the next financial year to ensure that the rent could be paid. A small case of fraud came to light in the minute books of the Maungakaramea library. In 1880 the accounts showed that the financial membership had dropped from twenty-six to six. Despite this downturn the committee filed a return to the government, signed under oath in front of a Justice of the Peace, which stated that it had 84 current members. Between 1885 and 1905 the library membership plummeted further to three financial subscribers. Library minute books show that many libraries became unpopular during the years that subsidies were withdrawn because new book buying had ceased.

### **The struggle for funding**

There was much antagonism over the allocation of subsidies by the Auckland Provincial Council. Many felt that they wished to control the type of genre purchased with their grants. Lists of titles had to be submitted to the Council and then either members of the Education Board or the Provincial Council Library Committee vetted them. In 1871 the Mahurangi Library were so incensed by the Council that they wrote a strongly worded letter stating that "the Committee are of the opinion that as the Mahurangi Library has been established for 13 years, governed by a committee of five annually elected by subscribers which arrangement has given general satisfaction any aid by the Government should be handed over to the Committee to purchase such books as they think best suited to the tastes of the subscribers.... But unless the Committee are to [be] entrusted with the expenditure of the money as it is understood has been the case with the Auckland and Thames Libraries, they will be compelled to refuse assistance hedged around with restrictions..."<sup>19</sup>

The struggle to keep libraries financially viable is recorded in detail in many of the minute books. Continually faced with a battle to procure funding for books, rent and in some cases, the librarian's salary many committees just gave up. In Mahurangi (Warkworth) each time the committee suggested that they had had enough because there was not sufficient support from the community to sustain the library there would be a swell of public support, but it never lasted. The community was loath to give up the institution, and all it signified in the town, even if it failed to patronise it. In the case of Waipu, the minute books show that more time was spent in running the hall and on fund-raising activities, than was spent on the business of running the library.

Because there was little money to spare, "libraries" were located in schoolrooms, public halls, or in church vestries where they were stored in bookshelves or specially designed and locked presses. In many northern small towns the library could be found in the post office, general store, or even in the public house, while others were stored in the spare room of a committee member. Some libraries consisted merely of a box of books, while others filled whole walls extending from floor clear to the ceiling. At Warkworth the only space in between the two shelves was taken up with a row of stiff-backed chairs which were lined back to back in the centre of the room for the "comfort" of the visitor who chose to sit and read awhile.

The life of many libraries and literary organisations depended on the commitment and perseverance of the founding members. In many cases these same members continued their involvement in the library for many years. Loath to give up the library when subscriptions dropped away, the committees would pour their energies into holding entertainment evenings, soirees, and readings. This would raise enough to keep things ticking over for a brief period until the next crisis arose. Those who merely joined the library generally stayed for a short period, their enthusiasm waning as the library either failed to transform into the kind of institution they expected, or the lack of reading material drew them elsewhere. In many when the government subsidies ceased the only members left remaining were the Executive and the Library Committee.

## Conclusion

Boxes of books were transported thousands of miles by ship to New Zealand in the hope they would provide a buffer against the unknown. Guides on farming, agriculture, mining, and cement were carefully packed beside the works of Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. These "libraries" were part of a desire on the part of some groups of colonists to recreate the life that they had left behind.

Uncovering the methodology behind the establishment of libraries in the Auckland province has been easy, as the minute books speak for themselves. The record books are crammed full of details of the most minute transactions. The seriousness of the undertaking was spelt out in the lengthy rules and regulations that were drawn. James Wellard stated that "Libraries, we find, were conceived by a small group of socially-minded philanthropists as a social corrective; they were next legislated into being; then presented or imposed upon sundry communities; then supplied indiscriminately with books — with the emphasis now on reform, now on education, and now on recreation; and finally tacitly accepted as an agreeable community endeavour which was commendable rather than essential."<sup>20</sup> This may have been true of the Mechanics' Institutes that emerged during the middle of the eighteenth century but in the small towns it would seem to have been driven by a simple and raw need for intellectual and mutual self improvement by a select few.

Historian Miles Fairburn questioned the part played by community facilities in providing a sense of community. He suggested that "the typical colonist was a socially independent individual"<sup>21</sup> and claims that associations were limited. He claims that the clientele of a lot of the voluntary leisure institutions were drawn from a small minority of the eligible population. Potentially each of the institutions "represented a different stratum of society"<sup>22</sup>. Membership, he states, "was strongly biased towards the upper strata - the minority - and against the lower - the majority."<sup>23</sup> A case in point here is the Auckland Mechanics' Institute, which was ostensibly for the working class, but whose location and choice of book stock precluded the majority of working class readers.

The survival of many small towns in nineteenth century New Zealand depended on the ability of the community giving "priority to the securing of those facilities that appeared to guarantee some

permanence, some commitment to such a future."<sup>24</sup> Libraries, schools, churches and railway stations were seen as part of the evolution from a temporary stopping-place to becoming a settlement or town. They indicated permanence and well-being within a community, and attracted settlers looking for a place to put down roots.

#### Notes:

- 1 Harris, Michael H. *The History of Libraries in the Western World*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1984. p.3.
- 2 A list of the libraries and their founders which registered in Auckland between 1878 and 1919 can be found in Northey, Glenda, *Accessible to All? Libraries in the Auckland Provincial Area, 1842-1919*. MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1998. pp.146-163.
- 3 Husbands, Paul. *The Peopling of Freeman's Bay 1880-1914*. MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1992. pp. 32-38.
- 4 Brett, Henry and Hook, Henry. *The Albertlanders, Brave Pioneers of the 'Sixties*. Auckland: Brett Publishing, 1927. p.223.
- 5 Sinclair, Keith. *A History of New Zealand*. London: Allen Lane, 1980. p.104.
- 6 Athenaeum, Literary and Debating Society Records 1887-1906, MS 527. Auckland Public Library.
- 7 Hames, L. Recollections of early pioneering days, in *The Albertlanders*, eds. Henry Brett and Henry Hook. Auckland: Brett Publishing, 1927. p.294.
- 8 Gillespie-Needham, Dulcie. *A Colonial and his Books*. PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1971. p.149.
- 9 *ibid.*, p.148.
- 10 *Chapman's Auckland Almanac*. Auckland: Auckland University, 1872. p.4.
- 11 Newton Literary Institution, in *New Zealand Herald*, 15 September 1864. p.4.
- 12 Dain, Phyllis. Ambivalence and paradox: the social bonds of the public library, in *Library Journal* 100 (1975), p.262.
- 13 Maungakaramea Library. *By-laws of the Maungakaramea Library*. 1880. MS 3959, WTL.
- 14 Thames Public Library. *Carnegie Applications, fms P Car 126, 179[38]*, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
- 15 Tauranga Mechanics' Institute. Rules and By-Laws, 21 July 1879. Justice Department, 307/64, National Archives, Auckland.
- 16 Minutes, 2 April 1872, Mahurangi Library, Early Records 1859-1864, DR WN WM 3764, Warkworth and District Museum.
- 17 Colgan, Wynne. *The Governor's Gift: the Auckland Public Library, 1880-1980*. Auckland: Richards Pub. and Auckland City Council, 1980. p.47.
- 18 Minutes, 26 June 1888, Lower Matakana Library, Minute Book, 1878-1888, DR 1813, WM, Warkworth and District Museum.
- 19 Minutes, 25 April 1871, Mahurangi Library.
- 20 Wellard, James Howard. *The Public Library Comes of Age*. London: Grafton, 1940. pp.97-98.
- 21 Fairburn, Miles. *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: the Foundation of New Zealand Society 1850-1900*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989. p.11.
- 22 Fairburn, Miles. Local community or atomised society?: the social structure of nineteenth-century New Zealand, in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 16 no.2 (1982). p.162.
- 23 *ibid.*
- 24 Hamer, D.A. Towns in nineteenth-century New Zealand, in *New Zealand Social History*, ed. D.A. Hamer. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1978. p.8.

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