

WANTED: A PLAN FOR A PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE FOR PAPUA AND NEW GUINEA

PETER BISKUP

Lecturer in History, Administrative College of Papua and New Guinea

THIRTY-THREE YEARS ago Ralph Munn, the Director of the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, and Ernest R. Pitt, the Chief Librarian of the Public Library of Victoria, undertook a survey of the Australian library scene which turned out to be a milestone in the history of Australian libraries and librarianship. 'In the widespread establishment of free public libraries as an essential part of the nation's educational plan', said the two librarians in their report, published in 1935, 'Australia ranks below most of the other English-speaking countries . . . Back of these unfavourable conditions lies a general lack of interest. Most Australians have had no contact with a progressive or complete library system and know nothing of its functions and facilities. It is pathetic to observe the pride and complacency with which local committees exhibit wretched little institutes which have long since become cemeteries of old and forgotten books.'¹

The contemporary library scene in Papua and New Guinea is in many ways reminiscent of the pre-Munn-Pitt days in Australia. The Territory lacks a public library system as the term is understood today, even in most underdeveloped countries.

¹ R. Munn and E. R. Pitt, *Australian Libraries: a Survey of Their Conditions and Suggestions for Their Improvement* (Melbourne, 1935), pp. 23-4.

The Treasury regards public libraries as luxuries (they are wholly the responsibility of the government), there is a dearth of trained expatriate librarians, and little thought has been given to the training of local library personnel. As with so many ills plaguing the Territory, the situation is due partly to past neglect. The public library service of Papua and the Mandated Territory of New Guinea was started by the Commonwealth National Library in 1936, at the same time as the library service of the Northern Territory. After the war public libraries in Papua and New Guinea became the responsibility of the Department of Education, but the Commonwealth National Library continued (until 1966) to procure and process, at the expense of the Department of Territories, a number of books, mainly works of reference. In 1955 the public library service was transferred to the Department of Civil Affairs (an agency in charge of such activities as transport, provision of electricity and collection of garbage). For a brief period during the early sixties public libraries were the responsibility of the Treasury, and in 1962, following the establishment of the Department of Information and Extension Services, they were finally taken over by that department. There were, at that time, two public libraries in Papua (Port Moresby and

Samarai) and seven public libraries in New Guinea (Rabaul, Lae, Madang, Wau, Wewak, Goroka and Bulolo), with a combined bookstock of 56,900 and a registered readership of 11,650. The estimated indigenous population of the territory was in the vicinity of two million, and the enumerated "non-indigenous" population (Europeans and Chinese) 25,330.

Throughout most of the post-war period there existed in the territory another type of public library, the village "library". The first of these were established on an experimental basis in 1949 by the welfare staff of the Education Department; after 1956 they were run by the welfare section of the division of welfare and development of the Department of Native Affairs. Books, mainly abbreviated classics, were provided free of charge (the average annual expenditure involved was around \$2,000) and were treated as expendable items. The experiment, in spite of the obvious inherent difficulties, appears to have been successful, and at one stage some 260 village "libraries" were in existence. However, the service was discontinued by the Department of Information and Extension Services when it acquired overall responsibility for public library service in the Territory.

In the field of public libraries proper, on the other hand, there has been considerable development since 1962. In May 1967, the following centres had public libraries (in order of size): Port Moresby, Rabaul, Lae, Samarai, Madang, Wewak, Goroka, Wau, Hohola, Bulolo, Popondetta, Mendi, Mt. Hagen, Kavieng, Sohano, Daru, Kerema, Kundiawa, Kainantu and Lorengau. The combined bookstock was approximately 90,000, and average monthly issues around 25,000. The libraries at Port Moresby, Rabaul and Lae have full-time staff and are open most evenings and during the weekends. The remaining libraries are part-time establishments staffed by teachers or clerks;

some are open only for six hours a week, others for up to twenty hours a week. Two libraries, those at Goroka and Hohola, are run by volunteers, while six libraries are at present in the charge of local librarians, and the number is likely to increase in the future. There is also a Country Lending Service, operating from the larger libraries, and the Port Moresby library sends from time to time parcels of old periodicals to individuals in isolation; these are forwarded free of charge by Burns Philp Pty. Ltd. and Steamship Trading Co., the two largest commercial firms in the Territory.

On the face of it, this is not an unimpressive achievement. The bookstock of some 90,000 volumes is more than adequate for a non-indigenous population of approximately 35,000, and the expenditure on books and periodicals (\$22,000 in 1966-7) is equally impressive—if the public library service is intended mainly for the benefit of the expatriate community. But a public library, as the name indicates, must cater for the needs of all sections of the community, of whatever level of culture, and its facilities ought to be available to all those whose potentialities it may develop: children, the sick, prisoners, new literates, as well as students and highly cultured people. In the developing countries, an important function of the public library is to follow up the education programme, so that what has been learnt in school is not almost immediately forgotten again through lack of reading material. A child learns to walk when it is very young, but if it is confined to bed for even a few weeks the process of walking will have to be learnt all over again. The moral is obvious, but when applied to literacy one only has to look around the Territory to see that not enough thought has been given to it. Millions are spent on education, and very little on the means of following up that education. A limited number of books is made available

free by the Department of Information and Extension Services² (mainly through other government departments) and by the Christian missions, but these books alone do not meet the need for a comprehensive selection of readily available literature. Mass literacy is the professed objective of educational policy, but most Papuans and New Guineans do not realize the connection between education and what is called the reading habit. This is because in schools the reading habit is not sufficiently nurtured: the children are taught to read but are not really shown what vast amount of pleasure as well as profit can be obtained from exercising their new skill. Fortunately there are hopeful signs on the horizon. For the last five years the Department of Education has been supplying schools with supplementary readers (books not specifically tied to the syllabus), such as the Longman Tropical Library Series or the New Oxford Supplementary Readers published by the Oxford University Press. In the last three years over 500 titles have been distributed to schools; unfortunately, only one or few copies were supplied to each class. Since 1964 another scheme has been in operation—the so called gift box scheme. Schools which had shown interest in acquiring

² During November 1966, the following titles were distributed by the Department of Information and Extension Services: *Diseases of the Cattle* (22 pp.), *Sowai Finds this Country* (books one to six, 20 to 32 pp., containing stories of a village man who sets out to learn about the government of Papua and New Guinea), *Sowai I—Painim Kantri Belong Em* (Pidgin edition of above), *Prevention of Alcoholism* (62 pp.), *Plan your Spending* (revised ed. 28 pp.), *Nasioi Language Course* (296 pp.), *Language of the d'Entrecasteux Islands* (20 pp.), *The Blackbird and other Stories* (supplementary reader, 40 pp.), *Make a Good Coffee Nursery* (English and Pidgin eds., 16 pp.), *Make a Good Copra-Hot Air Drier* (16 pp.), *Income Tax Information Folders* (English and Pidgin eds., 12 pp.). The department also publishes and distributes, cost free, the fortnightly *Our News* (circulation approximately 8,500) and *Nius Belong Yumi* (circulation approximately 10,000).

books for themselves have been encouraged by free gifts of books on a \$ per \$ basis. Each gift box is worth \$60 and to become eligible for the gift the school must show evidence of local initiative. In most instances a receipt for books already purchased is deemed sufficient for that purpose. The scheme has been extended during 1966-7, approximately \$30,000 having been spent on gift books in the primary schools and some \$5,000 in secondary schools. Primary A schools (schools following the N.S.W. syllabus and catering almost exclusively for expatriates) are also subsidized, in cash, on the basis of \$ per every \$ raised by the Parents and Citizens' Associations.

Once again, this is an achievement not to be frowned at. Unfortunately, practically all the school children come from homes in which there are no books, newspapers or other written materials—and it is in these homes that many will remain after they have completed their primary education. Only a fairly small proportion can expect to receive post-primary education (an enrolment of approximately 32,000 is forecast for 1970 in government and mission high schools, technical colleges and teacher training colleges), and in spite of the common expectation that even elementary education must lead to white collar employment, many primary school leavers will in fact remain in their villages. In itself, this may be a good thing, and in any case, it is largely unavoidable. The question is, should these children be allowed to forget some or most of their newly acquired skills and knowledge, and become "functional illiterates", or should they be encouraged to continue their education, using the term in a wider sense? And if the second alternative is thought desirable—as indeed it must be—the provision of adequate library services in rural areas is the obvious answer. Such public libraries could fulfil a number of functions: with properly trained staff, they

could be used as vehicles for social and economic change, and, in the particular political and constitutional position of Papua and New Guinea, of political development as well. Of course, it could be argued that Papuans and New Guineans would not use such library facilities if they were provided, since they do not avail themselves fully of the existing ones. Such an argument is difficult to counter because relevant statistics are not kept. A visitor to the Port Moresby Public Library, for instance, will observe the presence of native children but will look in vain for adult Papuans and New Guineans. But he will also search in vain for reading matter that is appropriate to them—books in keeping with adult mentality but plainly written. However, it has been proven over and over again that where a "good" collection of books is provided it will be used. The reading habit can be developed but not unless good libraries come first to enable it to be born.

The most crying need, providing the above argument is accepted, is adequate finance. This was recognized by the World Bank Report when it recommended the spending of \$40,000 per year on the purchase of books for public libraries, in addition to the provision of six mobile libraries and the establishment of 25 branch libraries and 60 *new* [italics mine] village centres, during the five year period starting in 1964-5. The second requirement is the overhaul of existing administrative arrangements. In any country, there are three possible patterns of public library service: (1) a completely government operated service, as in Papua and New Guinea at present; (2) separate institutions financed wholly by local government authorities, as in Great Britain; (3) a government subsidized service either in the form of cash subsidies to local authorities to conduct their own service (as, for instance, in New South Wales), or in the form of loans of

collections of books, according to the size of population, which are exchanged or added to regularly, with the local authority providing staff, buildings and equipment (as, for example, in Western Australia). A service organized solely by the government is generally unsatisfactory, even in a country like Papua and New Guinea where the government helps to shape the affairs of the community to a degree unimaginable to the average Australian. A public library is essentially a local activity geared to the needs of the community itself; it needs local initiative which is generally not forthcoming if the public library is organized centrally by the government. The second alternative, separate institutions financed wholly by local government authorities, is impracticable in the territory, for much the same reasons as it has been found impracticable in Australia. Local government units are too small and poor to provide an economic and efficient service, and there are other special problems involved. There is also the added difficulty in that the major towns lack local government, as in the case of Canberra. The third alternative, a government subsidized service, appears to be the most suitable arrangement for the territory, particularly in rural areas. This would entail, firstly, the creation of a statutory body with functions similar to the Library Board of New South Wales or some other Australian state. Almost three years ago Sir Grenfell Price, Chairman of the Council of the National Library of Australia and of Australian UNESCO Committee for Libraries, recommended the establishment of a 'voluntary and unsalaried Council' consisting of members of the House of Assembly, civil servants and leading citizens, for the most part Australians, with functions similar to those of the Council of the National Library of Australia, but his suggestion was not taken up by the authorities. Some sort of participation by local govern-

ment councils in the provision of library services could be accomplished without recourse to legislation, since under s.40 of the 1963 Local Government Ordinance they already possess the power to 'provide, or co-operate with the department of the Administration or other body in providing any public or social service'. Council libraries, run in co-operation with the Department of Information and Extension Services, or some other department, could also fulfil the functions of school libraries, at least in the larger centres; in fact, there is no reason why these two types of libraries should not be combined. There is a precedent for combined school-public libraries, if one is needed. In 1835 (when the United States of America was still a "developing" country) the State of New York passed a law authorizing school districts to levy a tax for the purpose of establishing school district libraries open to the general public. The system was later adopted by some twenty other states and proved on the whole successful.

The third requirement is more trained library staff. Libraries cannot develop unless they are directed by trained, qualified and experienced librarians. If they are not organized by properly trained librarians, they can be an expensive and inefficient luxury. Development of ineffectual libraries can do more harm than good, for they may even retard library development. The first step here is the recruitment of additional expatriate librarians, to develop a well-organized library service and to train Papuan and New Guineans for library work. The latter is of crucial importance, since the lack of trained local personnel is probably the single largest factor retarding library development in the Territory. Without properly trained local librarians, furthermore, it would be futile to expect continuous library development. This training will have to be done in the Territory. Overseas training, while desirable in itself,

has the disadvantage of being geared to conditions which do not obtain in Papua and New Guinea, and besides, the entry requirements of the institutions offering such training are too high at present (the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology course whereby the candidates, or some candidates, are first brought up to matriculation standard is a possibility here). Local training, then, is the only practical answer for the time being. A modest start in the right direction has been made in 1965 when the Port Moresby Public Library introduced an eighteen months course in elementary cataloguing and classification, history of the book and printing, and history of libraries. The current course started with seven trainees but the numbers were down to five by the end of May. Several modifications will be necessary before the course can achieve its purpose, however: the appointment of a full-time training officer, the selection of more male students (girls tend to become pregnant before the completion of the course or soon after), and a revision of the syllabus. Even Australian students often wonder why they should be burdened with what appears to them irrelevant information about papyrus and parchment, Aldus Manutius, punches and shanks, the rules of entry for Spanish or Portuguese authors, princes, saints and popes—in Papua and New Guinea much of this is simply meaningless.

Since books are the life blood of any library service, a discussion of the public library scene in Papua and New Guinea would be incomplete without some comment on the provision of suitable literature for Papuans and New Guineans. Much work has been done in this field already, particularly by the Department of Information and Extension Services, Christian missions,³ the South Pacific Literature

³ See R. Thomson, 'Books for Papua and New Guinea', *Journal of the Public Service of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea*, December 1961.

Bureau and the Summer Institute of Linguistics,⁴ but a lot remains to be done. The most urgent need is probably the provision of literature in Neo-Melanesia. Perhaps half a million persons in the Territory know and use this language, and a large proportion of these are already literate in it. Whatever the feelings of the expatriate community about the nature of Neo-Melanesian (many Europeans find it revolting, ridiculous and full of "insulting" words), it is the *lingua franca* of the Territory and may well be its national language in the future. For many users of Neo-Melanesian, it is the only medium through which it is at all practicable to convey information to them. A considerable effort has already been made to provide non-fiction literature in this medium, but there is more need for fiction, such as traditional stories both European and Melanesian, original literature written by Papuans and New Guineans as well as Europeans, and even poetry of which some has already arisen in Neo-Melanesian (work-songs, songs of homesickness, satirical songs, etc.).

In English, there is more need for books with a Papuan and New Guinean background, both at juvenile and adult levels. In schools, teaching is sometimes still done through the medium of books describing scenes or situations which do not exist in the territory (this applies in part even to the otherwise excellent texts produced for the West African market), so that the children are being taught in a vacuum. With regard to the provision of literature for adults, it

must be remembered that even though they may seem childish or naive, they are adults in their own cultures. They should be treated as adults, not as children, and the books for them should not attempt to reduce everything to the level of nursery tales. There is also the need for better illustrated books since illustrations, particularly in books of non-fiction, or in fiction dealing with foreign countries, are of equal importance to an easy text. Finally, there is the need for books in stronger covers. Most publications produced at present are paperbacks, often stapled instead of sewn. The short life of such booklets is wasteful (staples rust faster in the tropics); in the long run, a cloth covered casing would be more economical.

The channel of which one immediately thinks of for getting most of this material into the hands of the public is a Literature Bureau, on lines similar to the South Pacific Literature Bureau, the Borneo Literature Bureau or the various Publications or Literature Bureaux in former West and East African British colonies. Such a bureau could work along two lines: it could appraise manuscripts and then attempt to place them with a publisher, with or without subsidy, or it could handle the publication itself, on a self-supporting basis. It could also, in co-operation with the Department of Education, plan a publishing programme to meet the needs of primary and secondary schools, and to investigate the reading habits and needs of the post-school and adult public. Its work would be essentially one of development: in authorship, in encouraging the wide use of books, in assisting publishers, and in distribution. It could not itself perform all that needs to be done, but by continuous assistance in these activities it could do work of lasting value to the people of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.

⁴ See the institute's *Bibliography: Literacy and Translation* (Ukarumpa, 1966) listing 487 literacy productions in 46 languages which include pre-primers, primers, readers, folk tales and assorted booklets on health, agriculture, money, arithmetic and learning English; 69 items of Biblical translations and six translations of the Bible background booklet *How the Jews Lived*, in 30 languages.