Books and Libraries in American Society During World War II

Weapons in the War of Ideas

Patti Clayton Becker

Studies in American Popular History and Culture

Edited by
Jerome Nadelhaft
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A Routledge Series

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Routledge
New York & London

Published in 2005 by
Routledge
270 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016
www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
2 Park Square
Milton Park, Abingdon
Oxon OX14 4RN
www. routledge.co.uk

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Becker, Patti Clayton, 1951-
Books and libraries in American society during World War II : weapons in the war of ideas / Patti Clayton Becker.
p. cm. -- (Studies in American popular history and culture)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-97179-9 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Libraries and society--United States--History--20th century. 2. World War, 1939-1945--Libraries. 3. Public libraries--United States--History--20th century. 4. American Library Association--History--20th century. I. Title. II. Series: American popular history and culture (Routledge (Firm)

Z716.4.B37 2005
021.2'0973'0904--dc22 2005018027

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Acknowledgements

Born of a suggestion made in a graduate seminar, this study is a revision of my doctoral dissertation completed at the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I owe my greatest debt to my advisor, Professor Wayne A. Wiegand, a wise and helpful guide and an excellent editor. I also benefited greatly from the comments and suggestions of other UW-Madison faculty members: SLIS Professors Louise Robbins and Dianne Hopkins; Professor John M. Cooper, Jr., of the History Department; and Professor Stephen Vaughn of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. However, I take full responsibility for any remaining errors of fact or interpretation.

In the two weeks I spent at the archives of the American Library Association at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Jo Ann Jacoby and Elizabeth Cardman were invaluable guides to the most important storehouse of primary source material used in this study. Friends Annie Copeland and Bill Brockman provided comfort, companionship, and gourmet cuisine during my visits. Unfortunately, I did not obtain names of everyone who helped me at numerous other archives and libraries, but I thank them nonetheless.

Several University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point library staff and faculty provided critical help, including but not limited to: Christine Neidlein and Colleen Angel of Interlibrary Loan; Sara Weisensel of Periodicals; Marg Whalen of Government Documents; Barbara Paul of Cataloging; Nerissa Nelson of Reference; David Timm of Information Technology; and Arne Arneson, Library Director, as well as William Skelton and Susan Brewer of the History Department. A new faculty grant awarded by the UWSP University Personnel Development Committee funded a portion of my research.

I am grateful to my mother, Lorraine Clayton, for telling me to "look it up" when I asked her questions as a child. That advice, combined with my love of reading, led me to become a librarian. My siblings Beverly and

Geoffrey Clayton provided moral support. George and Sylvia Becker, my "in-laws," served as role models for academic excellence and achievement. And last, but not least, thanks to my husband David Becker. Patient, loving, and a most willing research assistant, I could not have done it without him. I dedicate this book to him.
Patti Clayton Becker
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Library

Introduction

"Imposing Frontages on Important Streets"

> "Books gained great prestige during the war. They were used in extraordinary ways and in very large numbers. Somebody should write a book on the subject."
>
> —Carl H. Milam[1]

Since its establishment in the mid-nineteenth century, the tax-supported, free public library has become a fixture in American communities of all sizes. Often occupying central downtown locations, libraries are frequently housed in impressive-looking buildings—"imposing frontages on important streets" Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish called them. Yet despite their prevalence and general acceptance as prominent municipal institutions, public libraries have been plagued by the problem of purpose.[2]

Over the years library literature has proclaimed educational, social, and cultural functions for the public library in a quest for definition, meaning, and importance. Central to most claims is the assumption that all community members will benefit, even if indirectly, from public library services and books. But although the library relies primarily on a community's tax dollars and exists to serve its entire population, historically only a fraction of its residents have used their community's library, and then mostly for enjoyment or recreation, not education.[3]

In particular, many librarians and other cultural arbiters have deplored the popularity of fiction, which they believed was inferior and possibly injurious (discussed more fully in chapter one). However, recent scholarship recognizes positive social values inherent in fiction reading. Jurgen Habermas describes how individuals who read works of popular literature "form a public" that shares not only the reading of those works but also gives rise to the social phenomena of public comment and critique. He traces this as far back as

1740, when Samuel Richardson's *Pamela,* one of the first novels ever published, gave rise to "book clubs, reading circles, and subscription libraries" within two years of publication. Similarly, Janice Radway discusses how romance readers and writers constitute what Stanley Fish calls an "interpretive community" that provides regularity to the meaning and structure of texts in that genre. Radway proposes that romance reading (and writing) can serve "as a collectively elaborated female ritual" that helps women to understand their "common social condition as the appendages of men" and provides a vehicle for them to "imagine a more perfect state" of satisfaction and acceptance of "all [their] needs." Readers and writers of westerns, suspense stories, and other "junk fiction" also constitute interpretive communities who read for a variety of serious reasons, including the pursuit of entertainment and pleasure.[4]

Use patterns contrary to libraries' stated aims and the failure of librarianship to recognize and value the social nature of reading not only make it difficult for librarians to live up to their commitment to serve the whole community, they also make the public library vulnerable to accusations of irrelevance and illegitimacy. As stated in a recent work on the Public Library Inquiry, a study of public library use conducted shortly after World War II, "it is difficult to conclude that the public library can derive its legitimacy and status as a public institution" from the fact that "most people use the library for the purpose of entertainment" rather than for "self-improvement" or political enlightenment. And with the recent proliferation of access to the information- and resource-rich Internet in homes and businesses around the country, some even question the need for public libraries.[5]

Library reliance on tax support, perceptions of under-utilization, and now competition from the Internet have contributed to professional financial insecurity, self-examination, and a preoccupation with the drive to establish and maintain legitimacy for the public library as an educationally and culturally necessary public institution. On a day-to-day basis public librarians may feel too busy to ponder the larger meaning of what they are doing, but underlying the story hours, information and circulation services, Internet access, bookmobiles, and myriad other aspects of modern public librarianship is a history of shifting sense of purpose. Michael H. Harris cautions against confusing purpose with function, reminding us that "the purpose of any institution is the result or effect that is desired or intended," while functions are "the means of achieving purposes or ends." Harris asks us to look behind functions to discern purpose or motive. In recent decades librarians have linked the library's purpose with the American democratic political system. "The purpose of the public library," claim Arthur W. Hafner and Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "has been and continues to be the rein-

forcement of our democratic belief in the equal and open access to all ideas for all citizens. No other purpose is justifiable," especially given taxpayer support. A quick scan of items published in recent issues of *American Libraries*, the magazine of the American Library Association, reveals the on-going professional preoccupation with asserting that the public library's purpose resides in its claim to be a significant community institution.[6]

LIBRARIANSHIP AS A PROFESSION

Discussion of the library's purpose is part of the discourse on the professionalism of librarianship, which asks questions like "Is librarianship a profession?" and "On what criteria does one base such a judgment?" This conversation is part of the larger debate about the definition and determination of professions. Andrew Abbott conceives of professions as "an interacting system, an ecology" in which professions compete for tasks. According to Abbott, an exclusive "social tie of jurisdiction" or a "recognized right, a legitimate link" connects a profession and a task. Abbott locates librarianship within this system as the dominant qualitative information profession (the other two are legal reporting and journalism). Abbott's description of the library profession is narrowly defined—he has not adequately considered the role of libraries in the act of reading or its commitment to intellectual freedom—but his ecological conception of professions is a useful framework for considering the social role of the public library.[7]

Librarianship arose in response to the creation of public libraries, and librarians claimed "the physical custody of cultural capital," according to Abbott. Thus, librarianship derived its tasks from the organization, rather than from technological innovations or natural phenomena, the other objective sources for professional tasks. Adapting Kenneth Burke's philosophical explanation of human motivation using "five key terms of dramatism" (act, scene, agent, agency, purpose) to explain the source of professional legitimacy, Abbott describes how librarianship was originally defined by its scene—the library—which is the weakest of the five means of legitimating a profession. Professions that begin by organizing around their scene often try to shift that jurisdictional base to one deriving from the more powerful (because more portable and less dependent) acts or purposes. According to Abbott, the desire for a stronger source of legitimacy has driven the impulse by which "librarianship attempts to become information processing."[8]

But this attempt to strengthen its legitimacy—to establish a recognized right to a jurisdiction—is not a new phenomenon. The library profession's on-going concern with purpose drives it to claim plausible jurisdictions associated with powerful values like truth, beauty, and democracy to help ensure

its continued acceptance and support. Commitment to these values is manifest in the "library faith," a belief that libraries have the power to effect individual and societal change, and which is the foundation of library mythology (more on library faith in Chapter 1).

Lacking an official mandate that would grant it official legitimacy, the library profession established its own mandate to coincide with official values, a strategy to help ensure librarianship's survival, social acceptance, and financial support. As John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan point out, "organizations under attack in competitive environments . . . attempt to establish themselves as central to the cultural traditions of their societies in order to receive official protection." To that end, public librarians tailored their tasks and libraries to achieve internally- and externally-determined social objectives, from their self-appointed mission to "uplift" the masses through reading great literature to assimilating immigrants, promoting adult education, advocating democracy, and eagerly cooperating with the federal government to deliver—and collect—information during wartime.[9]

Regardless of what libraries tried to be, however, they were constrained by their lack of authority. In his discussion on the roots of authority for the professions, sociologist Paul Starr claims that authority entails obedience (voluntary or compulsory) and dependence (or "face consequences"). For instance, people voluntarily seek medical attention and grant health care professionals authority when they surrender to a prescribed course of treatment. Librarianship does not command obedience or dependence, and does not enjoy that type of authority. Instead, the profession has an indirect source of authority that derives from library collections. Because reference works and religious, scientific, or scholarly texts contribute to what Starr called "the construction of reality through definitions of fact and value," that gives them "cultural authority." People implicitly acknowledged the cultural authority of such library materials to the extent that they used them, but their preference for entertainment over political enlightenment or cultural elevation often set library users in opposition to librarians.[10]

It was within this framework of competing forces that librarians, especially as represented by the American Library Association (ALA), saw World War II as an opportunity to increase their importance to the community by appealing to its patriotism, providing special services and materials, and cooperating with government and private agencies. They hoped these extraordinary efforts would result in increased support and a recognized educational role in the community. To many, the war seemed the ideal opportunity for the library profession to strengthen its legitimacy by demonstrating the importance of libraries to democratic society. This study examines the results of these efforts.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Very little scholarly material has been published on American public libraries or ALA during World War II. Jack H. Harton's unpublished 1989 master's paper covers the topic, but primarily cites periodical literature of the period and very few archival sources. Dennis Thomison's reworked dissertation devotes just part of a chapter to ALA in wartime. American library war information centers are the subject of a journal article by Richard W. Grefarth. Some articles have highlighted war efforts of individual public libraries or libraries within states. Louisiana public libraries during World War II were the subject of a 1994 theme issue of the *Louisiana Library Association Bulletin.* [11]

Similarly, overviews of public library development cover wartime libraries inadequately. Alice Gertzog and Edwin Beckerman describe the war years as "a watershed for all types of libraries," without discussing reasons why. Lowell Martin spends only two small paragraphs on World War II. ALA's centennial compilation features few pages on public libraries during the war. More narrowly focused library studies covering the period do not include wartime public libraries. Louise S. Robbins's study of censorship includes the war years, but very little censorship of library materials was reported during World War II. Public libraries on the home front are not within the purview of Gary Kraske's study of international WWII activities of the ALA and US cultural relations; nor does Pamela Spence Richards include them in her study of Office of War Information libraries overseas. [12]

Disciplines outside of librarianship ignore public libraries in studies of American culture during World War II, as recently illustrated by works of Michael C.C. Adams, Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, David M. Kennedy, and Gerald D. Nash. And although they participated in Office of War Information propaganda campaigns, Allan M. Winkler does not discuss libraries or ALA in his study of the Office of War Information.[13]

This study of public libraries during World War II adds to a growing literature on the general topic of war and American libraries or reading. David Kaser addressed Civil War reading. Arthur P. Young focused on the American Library Association and World War I, and Wayne A. Wiegand studied the American public library during that war. John Jamieson described World War II army library service. Public libraries in World War II England, Australia's New South Wales, and Nazi Germany were the subjects of studies by Dale C. Russell, David J. Jones, and Margaret F. Stieg, respectively. [14]

My investigation of American public libraries during World War II begins with a sketch of the evolving sense of purpose from the early years of

American public librarianship through the 1930s. In the next seven chapters I chronologically explore public librarianship during World War II by blending, comparing, and contrasting ALA rhetoric and activities with the programs, problems, and successes of dozens of American public libraries, clustering themes as appropriate. In the process, I have used ALA correspondence, press releases, meeting minutes, and published material, including the *Bulletin*, all important sources of "commonly held beliefs of the field." Annual reports, correspondence, local clipping files, and other primary source material from public libraries during World War II, along with professional periodicals, like *Wilson Library Bulletin*, *Library Journal*, and assorted local library publications, provided color, a variety of voices, and eye-witness accounts. The epilogue provides conclusion and analysis.[15]

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