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# Portrait in Paradox: Commitment and Ambivalence in American Librarianship, 1876-1976

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*Portrait in Paradox:  
Commitment and Ambivalence in American  
Librarianship, 1876-1976*

by MICHAEL H. HARRIS

On October 6, 1976 a group of library historians gathered in Philadelphia to commemorate the founding of the American Library Association in that city on that same date one hundred years earlier. This observance was just one of the more visible of many designed to celebrate one hundred years of professional librarianship in America.

It is pertinent to note that this celebration corresponded rather unhappily with the onset of what appears to be a sustained fiscal crisis for America's libraries. The natural desire to celebrate one hundred years of professional growth, intensified as it was by the ebulliently self-conscious celebration of the American Bicentennial, combined with the profession's pressing need to justify its existence to an increasingly skeptical public, has stimulated the production of a mass of literature on the history of American librarianship.<sup>1</sup>

This literature will prove disappointing to those seeking answers to the larger questions relative to the emergence of American librarianship over the last century, for in the main it is self-congratulatory, uncritical and heavily freighted with reassuring references to glorious ancestors who, one would be led to believe, were enlightened and humane beyond our most unrealistic expectations. That part of this body of literature which is not misleadingly self-congratulatory, tends to emphasize administrative aspects of professional development with little emphasis on interpretation or analysis. Particularly disturbing is the almost uniform lack of attention to the way in which societal developments pre-conditioned library responses over the past one hundred years.

Given these characteristics the literature tends to portray librarians as self-directed men of action, involved in a consistently more progressive and sophisticated endeavor to serve their fellow men. Little can be gained on the side of professional self-awareness from such studies since they do little to examine the assumptions underlying decisions; engage in self-deceiving

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