# Australia and the Globalization of the Public Library

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Abstract:

In the years following the Second World War and in the context of decolonization and the Cold War, the public library was promoted at a global level by a variety of organisations such as Unesco, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and regional organisations such as the South Pacific Commission. This promotion saw both the *idea* of the public library being championed – as a means to democracy, individual self-empowerment, and modernity among other things – as well as practice advice and assistance being given by the developed nations. Australia played a role in this, seeking to assist many countries in the region and even further afield to develop their library infrastructure. Australian librarians such as Harold V. Bonny and Lionel Courteney Key were important in this significant chapter in 20th century library history. This work sought to bring the public library to all the people of the world.

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The period after the Second World War saw the idea of the public library begin to take on global dimensions. Although the spread of the public library had been encouraged through the English-speaking world with the Carnegie Libraries, it was in the post-WW2 period that the public library idea began to take on truly global dimensions. This reflected the establishment of the United Nations and in particular UNESCO – the latter becoming great advocates of the library, especially the public library, but also the school and academic library, as a means for modernization and development. It also reflected to some extent the move towards decolonization and the establishment of many new independent nations in which education would be foregrounded as essential, and it reflected some of the preoccupations of the Cold War, as the two competing super-powers of the US and the Soviet Union fought for the ‘hearts and minds’ of many of these newly independent nations. We should also not underestimate the desire of library professionals to assert the importance of the library, books, and the library professional in the modern world as part of all of this.

This paper discusses some of the elements of the idea and actions taken to try and globalise the public library in the period following the Second World War, focusing on the first two decades and focusing primarily on the work undertaken under the auspices of Unesco – by the 1970s, ideas about education and development had begun to shift considerably, and there was much less optimism about the rapid progress that might be achieved. The role of Australia and Australians in this story is also explored.

Unesco – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – was established in 1946, with the declared goal of working ‘to promote peace, and social and spiritual welfare by working through the minds of men’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Many of the programs it went on to put in place over the next decade aimed to facilitate international co-operation in various educational and cultural endeavours. Libraries, especially public libraries, and library development were one area of concern. A *Unesco Bulletin for Libraries* was established in 1946 to promote and discuss the work done in that area, and through the 1950s and 1960s, Unesco implemented a variety of library-related programs, including organising surveys and conferences on the state and progress of public libraries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East; the development of public library pilot projects as demonstration libraries; the sending of library “experts” to places in need of advice on, and technical assistance for, library development; and providing small grants and funding for developing collections and library education, as well as promoting publication exchanges, something particularly valuable for the building up of academic library collections.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In addition, Unesco promoted the idea of the library as an educational and community centre – a place to facilitate adult education and to promote the importance of reading; as literacy centre; and as a centre for promoting the idea that libraries were essential institutions in the process of development, progress, civilization and modernization.

The period of the 1950s and 1960s was a time of considerable optimism for the work of Unesco and for programs focused on development and modernization. There were great hopes that problems such as poverty, illiteracy, and low levels of education could be addressed relatively quickly and easily through the application of state and international money and know-how. There was also a perception that the developed countries had an obligation to assist the less developed nations, especially those emerging from colonialism. This was tinged with Cold War concerns: the pre-occupation with intellectual freedom and individualism, frequently cited in the call for the establishment and development of libraries, for example, had especial import in the Cold War. However, these ideas were also entrenched in Enlightenment values, and in the values espoused in the 19th century that saw public libraries come to be regarded as cornerstones of democratic nations in which all citizens should be educated and participate in public life. In essence, it was accepted that a library is a fundamental good, an idea which we would probably agree with; nevertheless, it is important to try and historicise and problematize the way this idea works as part of its broader intellectual, social, cultural and political contexts.

The postwar public library idea was most clearly articulated in the Unesco Public Library Manifesto first published in 1949, and authored anonymously by French writer Andre Maurois. The manifesto expressed the belief ‘in the public library as a living force for popular education and for the growth of international understanding, and thereby for the promotion of peace.’ The public library was regarded as ‘a product of modern democracy’, and the Manifesto stated that libraries must be operated by the people for the people, and be open to all regardless of occupation, creed, class, or race.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Various public library manuals published by Unesco and authored by notable librarians such as British librarian Lionel McColvin, also helped to elaborate the public library idea, as well as provide practical advice and guidelines for the development of such libraries around the globe. In McColvin’s 1949 Unesco manual *Public Library Extension*, McColvin wrote that ‘the function of the public library [is] to provide every man with a full free opportunity to secure, at his own free will, whatever books can give him for the better enjoyment and utilization of his life’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) worked with Unesco to help promote the global importance of libraries. They argued in 1956 that: ‘Public libraries should promote and sustain freedom of thought and action, individual development, and the good of the individual and the community’. Libraries were, they argued, the means to free choice and liberty of thought.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Maurois further helped to elaborate the public library idea in his Unesco pamphlet of 1961, *Public Libraries and their mission*, in which he linked the importance of reading and libraries to culture and civilization. Reading a good book, he believed, made one ‘always a better man for having read it’, and further, the right to read was, he argued, one of man’s inalienable rights.[[6]](#endnote-6) He also argued that ‘Every library is a centre for international understanding’, and ‘serves peace as well as democracy’.[[7]](#endnote-7) For new nations still searching for a sense of national identity, they could help find this identity through books: ‘A library is not only a valuable instrument for the nation’s use – it helps shape the nation itself.’[[8]](#endnote-8)

It was evident that much of this language was shaped by a particular context and a set of largely Western, Eurocentric, ideas and values. It posited an idea of progress tied very much to Western ideas of progress and democracy, and with its embrace of modernization, even had a hint of imperialism in its language that sought to displace traditional societies, communities, and cultures in the rush to embrace the modern. But it was also undoubtedly the case that through the 1950s and 1960s, as countries emerged from colonialism and sought a path of effective development, aspects of modernization appealed. Most scholars argue that many developing nations embraced ideologies and practices of modernization, albeit picking and choosing what best fit their context, and often discarding some of the ideological baggage while keeping the practical elements proposed in modernization theory.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The embrace of the public library as a means to modernization and nationalism varied considerably around the world. For example, even before the Second World War, Indian librarian, S.R. Ranganathan, linked the library to anti-colonialism and nationalism, arguing for the library as a means of self-empowerment for the individual.[[10]](#endnote-10) In various library seminars held in developing countries such as Nigeria and India in the post-war period, participants often articulated the idea that the development of the public library was essential to successful national development.[[11]](#endnote-11) However, it should be noted that funding was not always very forthcoming for this type of work, and the take-up of ideas around libraries and education varied considerably, often tending to be less rather than more important to many governments of developing nations in their list of priorities.

So what were some of the activities undertaken to help promote the public library globally, and what role did Australia and Australian librarians play in this?

Australia took an active interest in the work of Unesco. An Australian Unesco Committee for Libraries was in existence for a period of time, and included librarians such as Lionel C. Key, Harold White, and J.W. Metcalfe, as well as government representatives. The work of Unesco in promoting international publication exchanges and training opportunities, for example, benefited libraries and library development in Australia. Australia also actively sought to have input on issues such as copyright conventions and international bibliographic standards. However, Australia also saw the opportunity to assist in the work of Unesco in developing countries.

One of the main ways in which Unesco sought to promote the public library globally was by sending “experts” to developing nations to survey library needs, and to provide advice and technical assistance. Through the 1950s and 1960s, these experts travelled to countries in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and Africa to look at existing facilities and to provide advice. Unesco sponsored librarians from countries such as Britain, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia to undertake this work. Australian librarians who undertook this work included Lionel Courtenay Key, Harold V. Bonny, and D.H. Borchardt. In addition, Australian librarians were sponsored by the Colombo Plan, an Australian regional development and aid program, begun in the 1950s (at least in part as part of a concern to shore up alliances in the region, and improve Australia’s regional reputation).

One Australian librarian who travelled under Unesco auspices was Harold V. Bonny, who travelled to a number of countries to survey library needs and provide reports and advice. Bonny travelled to Iraq in 1958 to report on library facilities. He also travelled to Jordan, Afghanistan, Libya, and Nigeria.[[12]](#endnote-12) In 1958, Bonny reported in the *Unesco Bulletin* on the challenges to library development in Iraq, but also saw the great opportunities as the educational system expanded.[[13]](#endnote-13) He also assisted in the development of library facilities in Afghanistan, including helping to classify the collections at the Kabul Public Library, and organising a meeting of librarians that could lead to the establishment of an Afghan Library Association.

In 1959, Bonny reported to the Regional Seminar on Library Development in the Arab States organised by Unesco. In his paper ‘A National Plan for Library Services and Its Place in the Educational and Cultural Life of the Country’, Bonny noted the challenges faced by librarians in the Middle East, but saw a good opportunity to plan a solid national library system. He also argued for a good system of school libraries, and the provision of public library services ‘geared to the needs of the community served’. He provided practical outlines and plans of issues and questions that needed to be addressed, including legislation, finance, the encouragement of reading and the needs for more books in Arabic, cataloguing codes and practices, bibliographical activities, library planning, and staffing. [[14]](#endnote-14)

Bonny’s work for Unesco in Nigeria resulted in a report on a pilot project on school libraries in Africa, produced for Unesco in 1966. While undertaking his survey in the early 1960s, Bonny sponsored a centralised school library service in the Federal Territory of Lagos. He returned to Nigeria in late 1963 to take up the post of librarian at Adeyemi College of Education in the Western Region and continued to work on his school library project for the Nigerian government. Work included the development of school library services, and providing advice and assistance in library planning and methods. He noted in his 1966 report that the project had a definite effect, although it had been limited by the availability of staff, and he noted that the effect of the project had spread to other regions in Nigeria. He also stated that: ‘Not only are libraries basic to education, which is developing rapidly in Lagos, but good school library services are a necessary prelude to the use of other libraries developing rapidly in Lagos’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Unesco was not the only international organisation for which Bonny produced library surveys. In 1962, Bonny produced a report on Library Services in the South Pacific’ for the South Pacific Commission. The Commission, which was made up of several countries, including Australia, oversaw the ‘economic and social welfare’ of non self-governing countries in the South Pacific. Bonny surveyed existing facilities in the region, and recommended that the Commission appoint a librarian to oversee library development in the South Pacific. Bonny noted the importance of libraries for education and general social and economic development.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Bonny also completed a survey for the Ceylon government on library services there. It isn’t clear whether this was under the Colombo Plan, but it’s likely. He visited Ceylon in 1960, and subsequently drew up a report and plan for library development. He argued that: ‘Public library services are an economic, social and cultural necessity. Money spent on public libraries – which reach the mass of the people irrespective of class or creed – pays a great dividend by way of increasing knowledge, efficiency and morale.’[[17]](#endnote-17) He argued for the importance of professional librarians and professional knowledge, which he argued were important for the recognition that ‘libraries and librarians are institutions and technicians in their own right’.[[18]](#endnote-18) He thus advocated the importance of a professional library association, and the importance of trained librarians.

Bonny was an advocate for the public library, but he was also astute enough to recognise the problems faced in public library development, and to recognise that any solution had to address the particular problems and cultural differences of local areas.

Another Australian librarian to work in surveying library needs was Lionel C. Key. Lionel Key, who before the Second World War had helped to set up the legislative reference service of the Parliamentary Library in Canberra and then during the war in 1944 went to London to head up an Australian Information Library, as well as doing work for Kenneth Binns, then National Librarian, after the war not only became the Deputy Librarian at the National Library, but also undertook a variety of projects for Unesco and for the Australian government through the Colombo Plan.

In 1954, Key travelled to India, Pakistan, Burma, and Nepal, through the Colombo Plan, where he undertook library survey work. As an aside, his correspondence suggests that he used these trips as a good opportunity to identify works that should be purchased for the National Library collections.[[19]](#endnote-19) His report on the needs for library development and training in Pakistan was recommended for implementation by the Pakistan Library Association, and perhaps helped to reinforce the importance of libraries for the Pakistan government; not long thereafter efforts were made to establish library training at university level. The Pakistan Library Association’s President in 1961, Dr Mahmud Hasain, noted in an address that the library was ‘not only a symbol of the educational and cultural strivings of our global society, it is also, possibly, one of the most potential deterrents against global suicide’.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Another important activity to promote libraries was library education and training, and the opportunity for educational exchanges played an important role in this. Australia undoubtedly offered some opportunities for educational exchanges for librarians, as attested to in some of these images and articles. Clearly, as evidenced through traces in newspapers and National Archives of Australia photographic evidence, some librarians were given the opportunity to travel to Australia under the Colombo Plan to observe and train in Australian libraries. However, this aspect of Australia’s involvement in the development of international libraries has proven harder to trace.

By the end of the 1960s, it was becoming apparent that there were considerable difficulties in achieving all that was aspired to. As early as 1958, Luther Evans, an American librarian who was Director-General of Unesco, lamented the lack of money for much of the work Unesco wanted to do, and stated that ‘many of us in Unesco are beyond our depths in what we are assigning ourselves the responsibility of doing.’[[21]](#endnote-21) In 1966, Lester Asheim, an American librarian who had done much work abroad for the American Library Association, stated that it was difficult to apply the solutions from one country to another; even economic aid was not enough, when there were considerable other barriers to establishing libraries.[[22]](#endnote-22)

As with all modernization and development efforts, the 1970s marked a change in aspirations and expectations. However, the public library continued (and continues) to be, as the 1994 revised Public Library Manifesto, states, ‘a living force for education, culture and information, and an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women’.[[23]](#endnote-23) Despite the cultural baggage that the library pioneers of the postwar period came to their work with, these aspirations still, we can only hope, have some resonance even today.

1. *Unesco Courier*, Vol 6, No. 6 (June 1953), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a discussion of these activities, see A. Laugesen, ‘Unesco and the Globalization of the Public Library Idea, 1948 to 1965’, *Library and Information History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March 2014), pp. 1-19. The *Unesco Bulletin for Libraries*  is an invaluable source for tracing international library activities. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Unesco Public Library Manifesto, in L.R. McColvin, *The Chance to Read: Public Libraries in the World Today* (London: Phoenix Press, 1957) Appendix A, p. 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. L.R. McColvin, *Public Library Extension*, Paris: Unesco, 1949, p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Unesco Bulletin for Libraries*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (July 1956), pp. 149-150. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A. Maurois, *Public Libraries and their Mission*, Paris: Unesco, 1961, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See for example, M.E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. G. Roe, ‘Challenging the Control of Knowledge in Colonial India: Political Ideas in the Work of S.R. Ranganathan’, *Library and Information History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 22-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For example, see *Development of Public Libraries in Africa: the Ibadan Seminar* (Paris: Unesco, 1954). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See *Unesco Bulletin for Libraries* Vol 12, Nos 7, 11-12, Vol 14, No. 3, Vol 15, No. 1, Vol 19, No. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Unesco Bulletin for Libraries*, Vol 12, Nos 5-6 (May-June1958), 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. H.V. Bonny, ‘A National Plan for Library Services and Its Place in the Educational Cultural Life of the Country’, Regional Seminar on Library Development in the Arab States, 7-19 December 1959, Unesco/LBA/Sem. 6, Unesco Online Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. H.V. Bonny, ‘Nigeria: Pilot Project on School Libraries in Africa’, Paris: Unesco, 1961, p. 7, RP/Nigerac 1, Unesco Online Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. H.V. Bonny, *Library Services in the South Pacific*, Noumea: South Pacific Commission, 1962, p. (iv). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. H.V. Bonny, *Library Services for Ceylon*, Ceylon Government Press, 1961, p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid.*, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Papers of L.C. Key, MS5645, National Library of Australia. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Quarterly of the Pakistan Library Association*, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. L.H. Evans, ‘Unesco: Problems and Prospects’, *American Library Association Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 9 (October 1958), 674. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. L. Asheim, *Librarianship in the Developing Countries*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966, p. 30, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. IFLA/Unesco Public Library Manifesto 1994, <http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s8/unesco/eng.htm>.

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