

1940.

NEW ZEALAND.

# COUNTRY LIBRARY SERVICE.

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE COUNTRY LIBRARY SERVICE FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31st MARCH, 1940.

*Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Leave.*

The Hon. the MINISTER OF EDUCATION.

Wellington, 10th July, 1940.

SIR,—

The Service has made steady progress during the year. No large-scale developments were attempted, because of the outbreak of war, but the task of planning and establishing the machinery for a country-wide library service has been steadily proceeded with. Features of the year's work have been the marked growth in the number of libraries participating in the Service, together with the utilization of the Service for two important functions dealt with later—the war library service and the Central Bureau for Library-book Imports.

## LIBRARIES AND THE WAR.

Those who regard a library as merely a collection of fiction or who have not taken the trouble to decide what a library should be may question the wisdom of the expenditure of money and effort on libraries during war-time. The worth-while library, of course, is much more than a purveyor of fiction—it is the most logical and economical means whereby a community ensures that reliable information shall be made available and kept available to it. There is no other practicable way of achieving this end, so that the properly supported free public library remains one of the best institutions which a democratic community can achieve, whether in peace or war. That part of the work of a public library which concerns recreation can also be fully justified in times of stress. Without unduly emphasizing the prophylactic value of fiction-reading, it is obvious that healthy enjoyment through recreational literature is valuable to the nation at this time.

## GROWTH OF THE SERVICE.

During the year ended 31st March, 1940, the number of libraries and small groups participating in the Service rose from 219 to 323. A full description of the methods by which books, periodicals, and information are made available to country people was given in the last annual report. Summarized briefly, these methods consist of (a) free loans of books on a liberal scale to libraries controlled by local authorities which in turn agree to make their libraries free and maintain reasonable standards of library service; (b) loans of books to independent subscription public libraries at a small annual charge per one hundred books lent; (c) loans of books through travelling hamper collections to isolated groups of readers at a small annual charge; and (d) loans through the post of non-fiction books free of charge to readers requiring information. All libraries served under (a) and (b) received regular visits from one of the specially equipped book-vans of the Service, at least three visits being paid to each library during a full year. Further, all persons, whether served by the free public library or through the isolated group, may obtain loans of reference books by post from the headquarters of the Service.

## THE SMALL COUNTRY LIBRARY.

The independent subscription library, managed by a small committee and with a number of subscribers ranging generally between twelve and twenty, has continued to provide the means through which the bulk of the distribution of books has been carried out.

It is a feature of New Zealand's rural life that so many small libraries, over five hundred in all, have been formed in the first hundred years of British occupation of the country. The labour and care expended on country libraries a generation ago is, however, not so commonly seen now, and it is frequently said that standards of book selection have deteriorated. Certainly the mobile stock of the small library is bound to correspond to the needs of its users, and by the criterion of use fiction of the "escape" type is preferred by the great majority of country readers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some small libraries are still unconvinced of the benefits of participation in this Service, because loans of books to libraries are required to contain at least 40 per cent. of non-fiction, although the small library which borrows fifty books at a time from the Service is still able to place on its shelves ninety fresh volumes of fiction each year at a total cost of £4. The value of the remaining sixty volumes of non-fiction, chosen from the best of current literature, should not require elaboration. It would be unreasonable to expect a small library with its limited number of borrowers to *buy* many works of non-fiction, but it is reasonable to expect that some such works should have an issue value when placed on the library's shelves for a limited time.