

That these benefits are appreciated is shown by the rapid growth in the number of small libraries which have participated, the number rising from 179 to 265 during the year. Twelve libraries withdrew from the Service, some because of lack of local support, others because the books borrowed were held to be unsuitable—*i.e.*, not “light” enough. It must be clearly stated that for each expression of disapproval there have been many of praise and appreciation for the benefits available.

The total number of books on issue to small libraries at 31st March, 1940, was 17,711, compared with 9,467 on 31st December, 1938. Many libraries now have loans of one hundred books or more.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION.

The following table shows the geographical distribution of the small libraries participating in the Service at 31st March, 1940, compared with the numbers for the preceding year:—

District.	1939-40.	1938-39.
North Auckland	38	28
South Auckland and Waikato	36	24
Coromandel, Bay of Plenty, and Gisborne.. .. .	16	9
Taranaki	8	5
Main Trunk and centre North Island	11	10
Wellington and Hawke's Bay	19	8
Total, North Island	128	84
Nelson and Marlborough	25	15
West Coast	12	11
Canterbury	53	41
Otago	28	12
Southland	19	16
Total, South Island	137	95
Grand total	265	179

SERVICE TO FREE LIBRARIES.

Although the small independent libraries form the largest numerical group, the free public libraries, which are increasing steadily in numbers, represent the most hopeful and progressive elements in New Zealand's current library development. The free public library is an important institution in a democracy. Great Britain and the United States, by their widespread adoption of this institution, have clearly shown how important it is. New Zealand has yet to follow their example, but a definite beginning has been made.

Additional libraries which were made free for borrowing to local residents by local authorities during the year were Bluff, Balclutha, Putaruru, Taihape, and Kaitaia. Twenty-one free libraries at 31st March, 1940, with a total population of 28,250, were receiving changing stocks of books from the Service free of charge, with a total of 4,325 books on regular loan to them. This compares with sixteen free libraries with a population of 20,914 receiving 3,222 books on 31st December, 1938. It is encouraging to record that several additional libraries under the control of progressive local authorities are to make the change from subscription to free service during 1940.

Subscription Libraries.

In most public libraries in which it has been tried, the subscription method of finance has been shown to be a costly failure. Subsidies by local authorities for library purposes can be justified only where a substantial proportion of the population makes use of the facilities provided and where those facilities are such that commercial libraries cannot provide them. Larger libraries have been able to effect a compromise in the matter by maintaining reference collections available for free consultation by local residents, together with extensive reading-room facilities, but the subscription system has prevented large numbers of potential readers from borrowing books for home reading. The free public libraries of New Zealand at Dunedin, Timaru, Palmerston North, and the twenty-one libraries now participating in the Country Library Service, show an overwhelming superiority in numbers of users compared with libraries where subscriptions are still demanded, as well as a better standard of book stock and library service.

Small Free Libraries.

Small free public libraries, however, even with the aid of loans of books from this Service, have still some important problems to solve. The size of a local unit for library service needs to be greater than is the case with many such units at present. It is important, if the best use is to be gained from a collection of books and periodicals, for the services of a reasonably well trained librarian to be available. Unless there is a population of at least two thousand, this is impossible. In many smaller boroughs and larger town districts the population falls below this figure, and the only solution is for neighbouring counties, whose residents are just as vitally concerned in the benefits of efficient library service, to co-operate with each other and with the nearby borough or town district to support district library projects which will place free library service within the reach of all their residents.