

Linwood Library Gazette

"Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body."

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ANY BOOK FOR ANY READER

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The library system of England is by no means the best in the world. Yet it is enough to make reading New Zealanders go bright green with envy.

The idea behind all libraries (except private collections) is to pool the books and the book expenditure of a group of people so that each may have access to a far wider range of recreational or informative reading material than he could afford to own. Like roads, parks and schools, libraries are examples of what practical socialism makes possible. In England the principle has been carried one step further. Libraries have combined into eight large regional systems, and these systems are co-ordinated by the National Central Library in London. Through the system of inter-library borrowing which this comprehensive linking up makes possible, any person may, broadly speaking, borrow any book.

Experience has shown in England that fully rate-supported libraries whose service is free to all are not an extravagance but a necessity. Experience has also shown that small communities should not try to maintain a separate library service, but should combine with other small communities to form a large enough group. Consequently the country is covered by free public libraries in all cities and sufficiently large towns and free county library systems for the smaller communities and countryside. All citizens may borrow free from the library supported by the city, borough or county council responsible for the districts in which they reside.

No library, however great, can have all books which are likely to be wanted. But

a borrower wanting any book may apply to his city, borough or county librarian. If the book is not possessed by the library system, the librarian will apply to the regional headquarters, where there is a "union catalogue" recording the books in all the libraries of the area. As each regional group includes not only all public library systems but also most university and special libraries of the area, there is a good chance that the headquarters will be able to locate and borrow a copy within the region. If not, the regional headquarters applies to the National Central Library in London. This library has a growing stock of books which are not easily obtainable elsewhere, and may supply the book from its own shelves. Or it may request the other seven regional headquarters to find and send a copy of the book. Or it may buy the book. If the book is otherwise unobtainable, it may apply to the headquarters library of another country. But if it is at all possible, the book asked for by the resident of the most remote village will be supplied.

Of course, there are limitations to this wonderful organisation. Encyclopaedias, rare books and scarce pamphlets, are not usually available for borrowing. In general these books are never let outside the doors by any library, even to its own borrowers. Another class of book not included in the scheme is current fiction. At first sight this seems (to New Zealanders who mostly think that a library begins and ends with current fiction) a serious drawback. Actually, however, there are not in England such small library units as here, and each library system is able to buy a reasonable stock of fiction for its own readers. In special cases, fiction can be borrowed in England between libraries, but by supporting libraries as we support