

Part One

Looking at London

Possibly more has been published on parliamentary librarianship in the last fifteen years than over the previous one hundred years. Australia has contributed its share, but except for the publication in 1965 of a pioneer international survey entitled *Library Services to the Legislature: A Symposium*, most of the items have been modest.¹ The publication in 1991 of Dr David Menhennet's *The House of Commons Library: A History* marks a culminating point in the study of parliamentary librarianship in parliaments of the Westminster system: it crowns the publications of recent decades and has scarcely a counterpart in its scope, depth and quality.² Although, strictly speaking, purely an institutional history, the work has a much wider import, raising incidentally vital questions about the practice and future of parliamentary librarianship in general. Apart from being the definitive history of the House of Commons Library, the work casts light on some of the less studied aspects of the life and atmosphere of the British Parliament, particularly in the nineteenth century. It offers much more than the title might suggest.

Dr Menhennet, recently retired as Librarian of the House of Commons, has had a lifetime's experience in the Library at Westminster, and is a distinguished practitioner of parliamentary librarianship. With this advantageous background of experience and inside knowledge goes the enviable asset of being a writer of quality. The style is lucid, the narrative flows easily with an engaging touch of personal involvement. Occasional authorial comments and exclamation marks enliven the work and are never intrusive or otiose. Not the least of the work's merit is that the author brings to life issues and policies of a bygone age. In lesser hands these matters could become ponderous and antiquarian.

Another facet of the work which deserves comment is the balanced use of extracts from official reports and minutes. To cite such sources is, of course, inescapable in histories of this kind. There is certainly a rich vein for the author to exploit. Indeed, readers might well welcome additional extracts, because there is obviously much more upon which to draw. A supplementary volume of documents and reports would provide a valuable source book for students and historians who may not have easy access to the range of materials quoted or alluded to by the author. Such a source book or 'reader' would be unique in its field and would do much to promote further study in the history and challenges of parliamentary librarianship.

It is surprising to learn that the Mother of Parliaments did not possess a properly constituted library until 1818. The Library of Congress dates from 1800 and the author states: 'The earliest official parliamentary library in the British Isles had belonged to the Irish House of Lords (p.2).' When was that library founded? What became of it? Dr Menhennet points out that the House of Commons definitely had books and records long before it had an identifiable library as such, so that there is a certain vagueness in setting a precise date for the 'founding' of the Library. The same cannot be said about the date of appointment of the first Librarian 'to', later 'of', the House of Commons: Benjamin Spiller was appointed in January 1818. Possibly the same arbitrariness about determining the date of origin of other parliamentary libraries might be true: it is so in the case of the Parliamentary Library of New South Wales. It would be an interesting exercise to seek to determine the dates of the earliest parliamentary libraries in the Westminster system: possibly Canada or the West Indies might provide some surprising details.³

1. *Library Services to the Legislature: A Symposium* Sydney, N.S.W. Parliamentary Library, 1965. 117p.

2. *The House of Commons Library: A History*, by David Menhennet (House of Commons Library Document no.21) London, HMSO, 1991. zii, 162p. ill. (includes 9 Appendices with lists of officers, details of staff, research services, list of publications produced etc.)

3. *Canadian Parliamentary Libraries and Their Environment Through the Years*: (A Paper by Brian Land. APLIC Conference, Quebec City, October 9 1991.)

The Library which Benjamin Spiller superintended from 1818 began fairly modestly with a single small room (The Ancient Committee Room). Spiller worked alone in quarters which from the outset were inadequate. The Library's holdings soon overflowed into corridors and other areas. This experience prefigures what was to be the experience of so many other parliamentary libraries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author traces the various steps which finally led to what was 'clearly regarded in 1825 as the urgent task of designing and building a new Library for the Commons(p.5).' The new Library, designed by the famous Sir John Soane, was ready in 1828, but by then the new premises were again too small because use had greatly increased in the meantime, seating was insufficient, and the stock was growing rapidly. Dr Menhennet describes all these developments, drawing upon the indispensable Select Committee investigations into the Library in 1825, 1826, 1830 and 1832. Extra space was 'found' in 1832. This too has a familiar ring to it! In October 1834 the House of Commons and its Library were devastated by a fire. A new start became necessary.

Of great interest are the details of what books the Library had in its collections in its formative years. This is a question still of importance in the wider sense, because of disagreements still current in some quarters about what is the appropriate collection for a parliamentary library. Spiller had compiled a list of titles held in 1825: the list consists largely of official serials (debates, laws, journals, gazettes). During the period 1818 to 1827 the stock was stagnant, but by 1830 the collection had over 4,000 volumes, which grew to 5,500 volumes by 1832. A printed Catalogue, prepared in 1830, was issued as a parliamentary paper. It is noteworthy for its preface by J. Rickman, which is reprinted as Appendix One to the work under review. Dr Menhennet's analysis of the Catalogue makes it clear that the Library's books were still almost exclusively official in nature or interest. He notes that Shakespeare's name is not in the Catalogue and that the sole book of poetry is one entitled *Opera Poetarum Latinorum*. Rickman's preface is of value to students of British parliamentary papers for the information he gives on the indexing and analysis of parliamentary papers done by T.C.Hansard and his successors. Rickman also sets out details of the collecting policy of the Library and the nature of its holdings. It is of great assistance to have this information now so readily accessible.

In 1832 the Inglis Select Committee recommended that the Library should not collect 'the current literature of the day', and that it should exclude the ancient and modern classics in any language as well as works of science or books of theology. These restrictive guidelines were fortunately not to hold sway for long. When one considers the enormous role played in British public affairs by pamphlet literature, one realises how narrow the outlook of the Inglis Committee was. It would seem from later parts of the text that the Library nowadays has a collection of the theological tracts associated with the Oxford Movement. That particular theological controversy had devastating effects on quite a few of the families represented in the House of Commons. On page 11, the author comments that 'the austerities of the 1830 Catalogue were in some measure a calculated counterbalance to the extra-parliamentary tastes of those numerous wealthy Members... who came to Westminster from houses where a well-stocked private library was considered essential.' That is no doubt a just observation, reflecting something of the social composition of the Commons' membership at this period. The Reform Acts and other political and social changes would have an effect on that membership, vindicating the broader collecting policies actually adopted and creating a library collection valuable for the ever-changing and unforeseeable needs of the future as well as for present, often transient, concerns. The 1834 Fire unfortunately destroyed a large part of the early library collection, but the more liberal and sensible collecting guidelines were to survive that catastrophe. Those guidelines have also in the meantime demonstrated their validity.

In addition to the questions of suitable accommodation and the nature of the books to be collected and housed in the Library, the third great question of the time was concerned with its management and control. Dr Menhennet goes scrupulously into the sources, presenting a clear picture of the Library's evolution from an appendage to the Clerk's Department (which it was until 1830), to an establishment with a certain independent status. The question of the Library's 'future management and regulation' had begun to interest Members themselves in the 1830's: on several occasions recommendations were made that the Speaker be assisted in his control of the Library by a standing committee of Members. The first such committee was established in 1834: among its sixteen members was the young W.E.Gladstone. Dr Menhennet remarks(p.14):

In retrospect this large membership was to prove a blessing: with the coming disaster of the 1834 Great Fire, it was fortunate for the Library that a large Committee of Members should be concerning itself with its affairs.

The results of these decisions and the early deliberations about the appropriate method of control of the Library led to its being clearly established that 'either through Mr. Speaker or through a Select Committee or through a combination of both the Library should be directly answerable to the House. That general principle has not changed(p.15).'

Another point, also with great bearing on the Library's status and progress, was dealt with in the 1832 Inglis Select Committee Report. This related to the salary and career opportunities of the Librarian and his assistant. The Inglis Committee was aware of the limited career path within the Library and that other more lucrative employment possibilities were available within the House of Commons service. In order to retain staff it was recommended that the salaries in the Library be equal to those of 'Clerks of the Establishment of the same standing (p.15).' Even at this early stage of the Library's history we find a topic arising which has remained, it seems, one of the constant irritants in parliamentary librarianship generally. This question casts a long shadow into the future.

The themes dealt with from 1818 until the Great Fire of 1834 embrace issues which have, in one form or another, proved to be characteristic for many other parliamentary libraries. Much of Dr Menhennet's text applies consequently to similar libraries in other parts of the globe. The nature of the solutions reached at Westminster is thus of more than academic interest. In some instances Westminster has been the model to follow; in other instances it has had less influence, but certainly it has never been less than an example worthy of respect and study. Developments in the House of Commons Library after 1834 build on what was achieved up to that date. The basic pattern was established and as future problems arose their nature and solution had applicability to most other parliamentary libraries.

The highpoint for the House of Commons Library came in 1852 when the fine set of rooms designed for its use by Sir Charles Barry and Augustus Welby Pugin were first occupied. The intervening period since the 1834 fire seems to have been a difficult, stagnant one for the Library which necessarily had to improvise in inadequate and scattered quarters. The new Library, however, was in every respect superior: its location was central and most convenient for users, its outlook over the Thames was admired, the furnishings and outfitting of the rooms were elegant, and the space available for collections was ample. Attractive rooms made possible an improved level of service. The Library was thus excellently equipped in 1852 to move forward. The series of photographs accompanying the text amply document the handsome appearance and opulence of the Library's new accommodation.

The collections grew rapidly (1834:4,000 volumes; 1857:30,000 volumes). The ambit of collecting was wide and the 1857 printed Catalogue shows that the Library 'had become very much a general collection of books (p.48)", not just a collection of historical and constitutional information as had been envisaged at one stage. The author devotes interesting pages (47-50) to discussing aspects of the collection, listing titles of an unusual or rare nature. He mentions that the Library had acquired in French the complete works of the celebrated naturalist, Baron Georges Cuvier, and the folio set of Sylvestre's *Paleographie Universelle*. It may be worth comment that the N.S.W. Parliamentary Library holds the latter title and has an edition of Cuvier's twenty-volume work *Le Regne Animal*. Few libraries, however, could claim to hold the eleven-volume set of Blaeu's *Atlas Major*, a choice item indeed. Likewise, the pamphlet collection grew considerably and the author's description makes it obvious that the House of Commons Library had become both extensive and distinguished in its holdings as the century proceeded. He concludes (p.50):

Nevertheless, the House of Commons fortunately still possesses, in 1991, a fascinating mix of official, general and even recreational reading which is one of its strengths as well as constituting, in view of the shortage of shelf space, one of its problems.

The growth of the library continued unimpeded during the rest of the nineteenth century, but the nature of the collections and the acquisitions policy were seriously questioned in 1923, in a 'scholarly critical' report prepared by Sir Charles Oman, himself a Member of the House of Commons. Dr Menhennet briefly reviews the Oman Report (p.62) and believes that it was 'perhaps rather too sweeping' in some of its condemnations. It would be useful to see the historian's full text which does not appear to have been printed in its entirety. Oman's Report seems to be an expression of a wider feeling of dissatisfaction among Members generally with the way the Library was operating. The roots of this dissatisfaction stretch back into the previous century when, it may be surmised, stagnation rather than progress had set in after the heady days of the new premises had settled down. Dr Menhennet would not necessarily agree with that diagnosis to judge by his text on page 55 where he defends the Library as matching 'the spirit of the age' in the latter part of the previous century. His text is discreet and tactful, and he may well be quite just in his observations. One wonders, however, whether a deeper analysis might not provide some other points worth considering. From knowledge of the Australian parliamentary libraries of the same era, it seems clear that the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of stagnation in parliamentary librarianship. That the Australian parliamentary librarians occupied positions of prestige and privilege was acknowledged by other librarians; occasionally talk of 'sinecures' was heard. Their tenure of office was often long and may have contributed to a certain professional desiccation. It is a question which requires investigation in Australia. These remarks are not, strictly speaking, germane to Dr Menhennet's History and it is inappropriate to expect him to

compare the professional achievements of his Library with the contemporaneous position in other major libraries in London. Remarks later in his History, however, suggest that more light might be cast on the question which is of interest in itself.

One development highlighted by the author is certainly relevant to the House of Commons Library's progress and performance in the second half of the nineteenth century. The advisory committee of Members to assist the Speaker in the management and control of the Library ceased to operate from 1862. The contribution made by the members of the Library Committee is evaluated very positively on pages 33 to 34. The dissatisfaction with the Library referred to already led in 1922 to the establishment of a new informal Advisory Committee. It started off as an active body: Oman's Report was one of its first initiatives.

From what has been said already, it is clear that the Librarian had close contact with the Members, that he ran the Library with little help, and that his character and competence were essential factors determining the Library's development and success. This must have been especially the case during the long period (1862-1922) when there was no informal committee of Members advising the Speaker on the management and regulation of the Library. There may be little extant evidence to tell us how wide a scope the Librarian had in running the day-to-day affairs of the Library. Perhaps this scope varied according to the interest and energy of the respective Speakers and their Clerks. If the Library seemed to be proceeding satisfactorily, there would have been little cause for intervention. It would be useful to have some data on these questions. Obviously there is another book awaiting Dr Menhennet's skilful pen!

At this distance in time it would be difficult to establish much detail about the performance and professional competence of the early Librarians. It is not clear what qualities the Commons sought in its Librarians. Did it want bookmen, competent cataloguers or what? Perhaps these are wrong questions in this context, applying criteria of our century rather than those of the last. Social origins, family connections and patronage were all important then and they are even today not without influence in some parliaments. On one early staff member there is, happily, abundant information available: Thomas Erskine May's career is amply documented and the author deals with this important figure fully. He is at pains to highlight what Erskine May's library training and experience contributed towards his later substantial success.

That indexing of parliamentary records played a large role in this training and later success will surprise no one. It would be welcome to have details on other aspects of the technical side of the Librarian's job during these early years (for example, what amount of cataloguing was carried out and according to which principles? Were books and periodicals subject-indexed? How were books classified, shelved and identified? What kinds of catalogues other than the printed book catalogue were created?) These questions may be of little interest to lay readers, but would possibly allow other readers to get a fuller understanding of the early Library's environment. Also useful would be information on the types of records maintained by the Librarian. Did he have loan registers showing what each borrower used? Other facts of a pedestrian kind, such as hours worked, holidays granted, hours of opening and days on which the Library offered service would be also interesting for gauging the climate of the times in the House of Commons Library. It is probable that much of this information is contained in the reports of the various Select Committees on the work of the Library to which Dr Menhennet refers. If this is so, it only strengthens the plea made earlier for an additional publication of source material on the history of this important Library.

The next stage of the Library's development came with the re-emergence of the 1922 Advisory Committee of Members to assist the Speaker who still had sole responsibility for the Library. Arising out of the Oman Report, and probably from a wider level of criticism of the Library's collecting policy, was the 1923 recommendation that the scope of collecting concentrate specifically on the subjects of political economy, finance, modern history, constitutional history, political science and law. The Advisory Committee also decided that it would 'assist' the Librarian at periodical meetings to consider purchases in other fields. This practice was similar to one pursued for some time in the N.S.W. Parliamentary Library during the thirties and forties. It was a cumbrous and ineffectual way of exercising some supervision over collecting. In reality it allowed the Committee members to have first choice of the newly received books. Dr Menhennet does not reveal whether the practice at Westminster amounted to much, but the measure seems to indicate a dissatisfaction with the Librarian's lack of accountability for the books collected. That most collecting policies have some element of arbitrariness is patent and may be the least of all evils in librarianship if the selector is a responsible person of broad culture and sound education. Biases can be acceptable if they do not develop into some kind of 'King Charles's head'. It would be instructive to have more of the author's personal views on these questions. Particularly welcome would be an objective discussion of the term 'gentleman's library' which seems to crop up regularly in the accounts of the genesis of many parliamentary libraries. Nowadays there seems to be the suggestion that a 'gentleman's library' is something reprehensible: it is far from clear whether

this is anything other than ideological rhetoric being carelessly repeated. Dr Menhennet is well placed to offer worthwhile thoughts on this and the other questions raised above.

One Member, Mr (later Sir) George Benson MP had strong feelings about the nature of the Library's collections and services. In 1930 he castigated the Catalogue as 'useless' and in 1938 he became a member of the Advisory Committee and had obviously gained a forum where his views might have impact. Later he was to chair a Select Committee into the Library in 1945. He became an influential member of the post-war Library Committee and was 'to play a very important role in the expansion of the Library's services to the House'(p.63). A Memorandum by this important Member is cited by Dr Menhennet. The terms of this document make curious reading since they reveal some preconceptions and prejudices about the Library — 'hardly progressed since 1850', 'atmosphere ... of a country gentleman's private library' — as well as fresh ideas about how to make the Library effective for the new Elizabethan Age. Dr Menhennet's History now enters on the most interesting stage of the Library's conversion from a traditional parliamentary library into what it has now become: a diverse and responsive parliamentary and legislative research, information and library service of international stature.

The passages on pages 63 to 65, devoted to explaining the relative torpor of the Library in the first decades of the century, could probably be applied to other parliamentary libraries as well. It would seem that by the early twentieth century the reputation of parliamentary libraries as a class had noticeably declined and their staff do not appear to have been as highly regarded as they once were by other librarians. In Australia the 1947 Report by Lionel McColvin, City Librarian of Westminster, on his survey of Australian public libraries, had some harsh incidental remarks to make about some Australian parliamentary libraries. Undoubtedly the First World War and the ensuing Great Depression had some part in their decline, but at least at Westminster the Librarian of the House of Commons and his staff seemed to be aware of the need for reform. Dr Menhennet quotes from a 1944 Memorandum from the Librarian to the Speaker, urging provision of a 'modern up-to-date library'.(p.65) It will be recalled that in Washington one of the major changes to affect the Library of Congress soon after the end of the War was to upgrade the Congressional Research Service in a thoroughgoing manner. It was indeed the changed postwar values and expectations which seem to have been the catalyst for action rather than mere words. The author reiterates D.Englefield's words:'it was to take the Second World War to crack the traditional mould of the House of Commons Library'.(p.73) The cracking of the mould resulted from Reports from a Select Committee appointed in late 1945 to inquire into the Library, but an earlier Select Committee appointed at the end of the previous Parliament paved the way.

The Reports of these Select Committees virtually provided the Library of the House of Commons with its present charter. Its recommendations 'represented a fundamental commitment to, as well as a vote of confidence in, the Library's future development.'(p.75) That George Benson MP was its chairman must have greatly assisted its deliberations. In addition to requiring the creation of 'a modern and efficient library-based reference and information service', the Reports were also to create the added dimension of specialised research for Members. The researchers were to have 'special qualifications in the Social Sciences'. This was the beginning of a service requiring the blend of expertise, local knowledge of the political and parliamentary environment and culture as well as knowledge of the characteristics of clients, coupled with political neutrality. These are the hallmark of such services in most parliamentary libraries of national parliaments in the Westminster system. Dr Menhennet's words on page 75 deserve to be quoted in full:

In placing this research function in the Library, rather than recommending the formation of a separate parliamentary research unit, Members of the Select Committee were again breaking relatively new ground. They established, in the process of doing so, the important principle that library, information and research facilities for the legislature should be integrated and mutually dependent the one on the other for their effective and economical running. Today, the much larger library-based organisations which have grown up, for example, in Westminster, Canberra and Ottawa, and which still combine these three related functions, owe much to the foresight of early bodies of Members such as the 1945-46 Select Committee which plotted the basic course to be followed.

In some respects the account given on pages 74 to 82 ('Time for a Change') form the heart of the History. They set out the numerous changes which sprang from the recommendations of the 1945-46 Select Committee. Those changes definitely established the current identity of the Library by giving its previous orientation a new direction, by setting it achievable objectives, by providing the necessary resources to allow it to develop an independent dynamism and vigour, but yet still preserving its valuable history and sense of tradition. It is remarkable how much was achieved on a variety of fronts simultaneously. It was one of those golden moments when all the necessary ingredients were available: the right ideas, the right men and the necessary resources. The author has done well to provide so much detail on this particular era. It is certainly the watershed for the Library in this century, paralleling, but

far outstripping, the building of the new library in 1852. A list on pages 80 to 81 gives the then Librarian's summary of the progress made in the decade 1950-1960. The list is extremely impressive.

The changes which occurred affected accommodation, stock, staff numbers, conditions and salaries, services, organisation and policies. All these changes were necessary to enable the Library to undertake an active role rather than the essentially passive one which characterised many parliamentary libraries for long periods of their history. Most significant must have been, if only gradually at first, the change in the calibre of staff needed to put into effect the newly defined objectives of the Library. A greater sense of identification with the calling of parliamentary librarianship as a career must have been one result. This aspect of the matter is only briefly touched on by the author at this point of his History. One would certainly like more information on the impact of those changes on staff, both in the Library as well as in the other sections of the Commons administration. Since it was also a time of general growth in the whole Parliament, the Library changes may have been viewed as part of a wider pattern of change. This would have dampened any sense of competitiveness or envy which can arise all too easily in the self-contained environment of parliaments.

The spirit of the times required the changes. They were only a start, of course. The author states at page 81:

By 1950, Members' outlook and expectations were different [from earlier years]. Most of them, certainly would have said that the Library was or should be an integral part of the whole process of parliamentary government...

The phrase 'integral part' may seem to be overstating the case at this juncture. To become an 'integral part' seems more apt as a long-term objective, but even then there are some who would argue that the phrase is rather too grandiloquent for the reality of the political and parliamentary situation. However one views the matter, the phrase and what it implies set the keynote for the further evolution of the House of Commons Library. Over and beyond that, the phrase has applicability in its wider content to parliamentary libraries in general: it encapsulates the host of issues which both challenge and give validity to parliamentary librarianship as a distinct calling with its own norms and ethics, in short with its own 'raison d'etre.'

Chapter 5 (Years of Challenge and Growth) and Chapter 6 (The Department of the Library) cover the years from 1960 to the year 1991. The final chapter, Chapter 7, is appropriately entitled 'Prospect: The Library and the New Parliamentary Building'. The events of this thirty-year period are in many respects a fleshing-out of the matters put in train by the 1945-46 Select Committee. These chapters are full of detail and it becomes somewhat arbitrary to pick out 'highlights'. The achievements were manifold and despite some temporary rebuffs, the Library moved consistently forward, both in terms of modernisation of its basis of operation and in terms of its level of service. Changes were likewise affecting the Westminster Parliament as an organisation, of which the Library is but a part. Among the important developments of an organisation-wide kind was the creation in 1965 of the House of Commons Services Committee which had a Library Sub-Committee. This Sub-Committee decided that the Librarian should assist it, 'a practice which has invariably been followed since then.' (p.88)

The effect on the Library of the 1975 Bottomley Committee's Report on the House of Commons (Services) was considerable. By legislation in 1978 the internal departmental administration of the House of Commons Service was modernised: the Library was one of the Departments set up under the Act. The Library had been indeed a 'Department' since August 1967. The Compton Committee report which preceded the Bottomley Committee by a little had not wanted the Library to be a separate Department, so the results of the Bottomley Committee's Report were very important for the Library's future status. Heads of Departments now form the Board of Management; the Deputy Librarian sits on the Administration Committee, a body of more restricted scope dealing with day-to-day issues, and operating under the Board. Dr Menhennet sets out fully the changes (and improvements) which flowed from the Bottomley Committee's findings: they make instructive reading for Australia where changes to parliamentary administration and organisation are now fashionable. The investigations and procedures followed by the Bottomley Committee have, however, not generally been followed here and results may be less likely to succeed in addressing the fundamental issues.

The development of research services is one aspect of the modernisation of services which deserves special mention. The modest beginnings where service was largely based on the preparation of bibliographies were soon to blossom out to include a range of specialised, individually tailored responses to specific requests for detailed reports, analyses and summaries. The inevitable need to foster subject specialisation was soon to follow. Although we might smile at the suggestion made by Librarian Saunders to the 1945-46 Select Committee that research staff should be able to undertake journeys to consult other libraries and information sources 'in any part of the globe' (p.76), his perception of what genuine research may require is sound. There are still unresolved problems in deciding what are the

limits of 'research' in parliamentary libraries; the term 'research' is slippery, not least to the clientele itself. The necessary yoking of 'research' and 'subject specialisation' raises additional problems. There is much talk about the need of the Legislature to be able to match the Executive's information preponderance, expertise and resources. This can never be a real option for Legislatures, but approximations are achievable in some areas. Costs and benefits are, however, harder to gauge. One sobering point which is scarcely ever raised is that politicians are not necessarily objective users of information. Sometimes they can be quite the opposite. The same can be said of governments which may also respond irrationally and 'politically' when pressures are severe.

It is scarcely possible to evaluate these complex issues in the abstract. They are protean and can only be understood in specific contexts. Economic criteria are sometimes adduced as the ultimate decisive factor in deciding the nature of a research service. Of course, cost-benefit issues must be addressed where it is possible to apply them, but they have limited applicability in the political and parliamentary arena. Dr Menhennet's text gives rise to all these reflections which relate to both the present position and future possibilities. It is fascinating to be able to trace the genesis and development of such issues within the context of one great parliamentary library.

In recent years the study of parliament and, in particular, the study of the House of Commons and the work of its Members, have given rise to a number of scholarly publications. In many of these attention has been paid to how Members can be made more effective. Naturally the role of the Library must be mentioned and Dr Menhennet makes the point that this outside interest in such questions has benefited the Library's efforts to expand and upgrade its services. Discussions of the 'information explosion' and of Members' need for information in manageable, evaluated form cannot but reinforce the necessity of having a research service of a particular kind which takes into account political contexts, personalities and other imponderables.

A further point of interest relating to research is made on page 97: the author outlines the Library's stated desire in 1975 to provide 'a more structured and effective service to Select Committees themselves'. This is a topic which points to the future as does the Library's early (1968) initiative to use computers for information storage and retrieval purposes.

The application of automation to a wide variety of library and information operations is a logical outcome of the objectives set up by the 1945-46 Select Committee. In this area the House of Commons Library has been notably successful.

It has led the way within the House of Commons Service and the achievements of its POLIS database have received wide recognition. The POLIS database is now being accessed by a number of users outside the United Kingdom. The author comments on the long gestation period of computer-based indexing in the Library, noting that the 'ten-year wait proved, with hindsight, to be not only necessary but beneficial.' (p.112) This is an observation that many other librarians would heartily endorse. POLIS itself became operational in 1980 and has continued to flourish ever since. It is indeed the indispensable platform for the Library to advance forward into the twenty-first century.

The latter parts of the History come back to familiar themes: the growth of the collection, overcrowding, and the acquisitions and weeding policies. Dr Menhennet's account (pp. 121-125) sets out the issues clearly and in a balanced fashion. He points out alliteratively that there is an 'almost limitless list of matters' on which the Library must have material available to answer inquiries. If one can envisage a parliamentary library having a subsidiary educational function in the future, the question of acquiring works of literature must be weighed. If it is true that writers, poets and dramatists provide us with the real picture of the world we live in and of ourselves as its denizens, it seems inescapable that literature must be an important library category. Did the Library acquire Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*? What about the plays of Vaclav Havel? The novels of Iris Murdoch, the poems of P.Larkin provide us with pictures of English social reality. Admittedly, they do not necessarily give legislators any guidance on how to set right what may be wrong! Are they in the Library? Should they be there? Those who have instant answers to these questions should be viewed with suspicion.

The prospect of a storage depot to cater for anticipated net growth 'for at least twenty years' is hailed as a breakthrough. It will certainly be a life-line, and in the meantime the Library will doubtless have an opportunity to assess its collection needs. The next decade will necessarily bring new factors to bear on this and other related questions.

As regards overcrowding of premises, new purpose-designed accommodation was occupied by the Library in Summer 1991. This entailed transferring one third of the Library's stock and about four-fifths of its staff. Whilst the Library will still retain a presence in the Palace of Westminster itself, most services and functions are now carried out in the new premises, 'Derby Gate' in Parliament Street nearby. This move consolidates fragmented services and staff, provides better overall control of

operations and also offers far more adequate facilities for Members' personal research staff, who number about 600. These persons are among the most active and library-dependent part of the Library's clientele. The projected changes mirror fairly closely similar developments which have overtaken some other parliamentary libraries. The creation of personal staff for Members is a trend which seems likely to continue. The parliamentary libraries are essential to Members' personal staffs in a way of which Members themselves may be unaware. Where else can these users find full collections of official materials organised specifically to meet political needs and where else is such a range of subject-expertise available exclusively for the use of politicians at short notice? Clearly parliamentary libraries are going to have to live with an ever widening circle of 'authorised' users from now on. This is but another justification for maintaining them at the requisite standard.

Services to the public represent a new and apparently growing aspect of the Library's information responsibilities. As a result of the 1977 report of the Services Committee of the House of Commons, entitled 'Services for the Public', a Public Information Office was created in 1978 within the Library. This Office, described by the author as a pioneering service, has proved a great success. Dr Menhennet provides statistics on its workload (p.107) and mentions its 'Weekly Information Bulletin' which is a guide to 'recent, current and forthcoming business of the House of Commons'.

The Public Information Office now includes the Education Unit of the two Houses of Parliament. The Unit, established in 1980, directs its activities mainly to teachers and students. The work of both the Office and the Unit interlock effectively with the Library's overall role as a provider of information at different levels of sophistication and as a source of expertise on the history and work of parliament. There is obviously the potential in these two bodies to develop a wider outreach benefiting groups not yet encompassed. The successes already achieved indicate that a public need is being met by these two Library-based operations. Their location within this context seems eminently sensible and cost-effective. Here too other parliamentary libraries may find something worth emulating.

The final section of Dr Menhennet's History briefly touches on the important Ibbes Report on House of Commons Services (1990). This is yet another review of management and control of services. Its recommendations are not spelled out, but it is mentioned that the Board of Management of which the Librarian is a member, will have an enhanced corporate management role. We will await the effects of all this with interest since it seems similar to concerns presently engaging the minds of Australian parliamentarians and parliamentary officers.

The final aspect of this work to be mentioned here is that of its staff. Some incidental points have already been raised and these can now be rounded off. The staff in 1990 numbered 174; the authorised complement in April 1991 was 195. This is a far cry from the handful in 1946, but of course we are scarcely dealing with the same library. Appendix Five sets out categories and staff numbers at various periods from 1969 to 1990. It is not easy to distinguish between the designations. The author does not go into the qualifications required of the various categories, but on page 114 he gives details of recruitment policies. He points out that recruiting standards are exacting and exemplifies this by revealing that in 1978 four library clerkships were advertised nationally. Four hundred and thirty applications were received, but only three positions were filled. It would be useful to know about the Library's policies with regard to performance assessment, staff development and career planning. In view of the difficulties experienced by some other parliamentary libraries with integrating professional librarians with high-profile subject specialists, it would be valuable to learn whether the Library has had any similar problems, and how it handles such matters if they arise. There is, of course, no suggestion made here that there may have been such difficulties in the Library of the House of Commons. Indeed, the strong impression one gains from reading Dr Menhennet is that the Library has been well served in recent decades by able leaders and dedicated staff. If the example at the top is good, the morale on the 'shop floor' will respond.

Conclusion

The richness of *The House of Commons Library: A History* makes it inevitable that a review like the present one can only pick out a few plums. There are many others left untouched, and for that reason nothing has been said about important themes such as the Library's international relations, its publications program, its services at various points outside the Palace of Westminster, etc. The work is stimulating as an account of the progress of an exceptional library; it is equally stimulating for calling to mind parallels to the experience of other parliamentary libraries. But apart from its own substantial merit as an institutional history, Dr Menhennet's book suggests perspectives of a wider kind, relevant to the future development of parliamentary librarianship. These perspectives embrace the parliamentary institution as well as the parliamentary library's role within the institution. That he ends on something of an open note with the Ibbes Report is symptomatic in this respect.

The reader is left with a taste for more, and obviously much more can be said. If Dr Menhennet could be persuaded to continue his labours, we would be curious to have his views on the bundle of managerial and professional skills he sees as now required to run such a complex research, information and library system. He only obliquely refers to the 'public relations' skills parliamentary librarianship requires of its practitioners: his personal success in this field would make it beneficial to others to have his observations on the matter.

This History commands respect as a fine achievement in condensing a considerable body of fact and information, summarising complex situations, and giving sympathetic pen-portraits of participants in the story. The clarity of the account is admirable and the balance achieved is impressive. Dr Menhennet leaves the reader in no doubt that the Library he led from 1976 until 1991 has made remarkable advances and that it can look confidently forward to a future as a leader in its field.