

Race and librarianship: part I

Eric Moon, editor of *Library Journal*, called it the "Silent Subject" [1]. The racial segregation of libraries, the nonexistence or inadequacy of library collections and services for minorities, and inequities for librarians were often beneath the surface—undiscussed or unrecognized. Efforts to move librarianship toward integration and civil rights were painfully slow, sometimes reflecting changes in society as a whole and, at other times, at their own pace.

Spectre at Richmond

The American Library Association (ALA) conference in Richmond, Virginia, brought visibility to the subject in 1936. ALA was "anxious to have Negro librarians attend in large numbers. Because of the traditional position of the South in respect to mixed meetings," ALA felt it advisable to send a "semi-official" letter from a local librarian to African American members informing them of the conditions they should expect. Although ALA had arranged with the host hotels that all delegates could use the same entrance, hotel rooms and meals were forbidden to black delegates by Virginia laws. Meetings that were part of meals were not open to black delegates, although they could attend sessions followed by meals, if they did not participate in the meals. Seating in the front right hand section of meeting rooms was to be reserved for them [2].

The library press made the letter public. *Library Journal* solicited comments from readers on the inability of ALA to extend full rights and privileges to all members [3]. Stanley Kunitz wrote a scathing editorial in the *Wilson Bulletin for Librarians*, denouncing the "spectre at Richmond."

[Y]ou must agree with me that a minority group of the A.L.A. has been greatly offended. If you permit this organized insult to pass unchal-

lenged, there is but one conclusion to be made: that American librarians do not, in their hearts, care for democracy or for the foundation principles of decent and enlightened institutions. . . You may say, as assuredly will be said, in defence of the Negro policy at the conference, that it is merely conforming with the laws of Virginia. To this I reply that there is a higher law . . . Other organizations make a practice of convening only in communities where their own standards of eligibility and respectability are honored. [4]

In response to the situation, ALA created a Committee on Racial Discrimination, approving its report in December 1936. It resolved that the association would stipulate in advance the provisions under which it would accept hospitality "with proper regard for its own self respect and that of its members." Although it was opposed to eliminating any geographical part of the country from consideration for the annual conference, selection of future meeting places would be conditional upon the admission of all members to rooms and halls on terms of full equality [5].

Coincidentally, the Medical Library Association (MLA) held its own Annual Meeting in Richmond in 1937. However, there was no controversy, because MLA apparently had no black members.

Integration of the Medical Library Association

MLA lagged behind other professional associations in integrating its membership. Not until the end of a decade of discussion in the 1930s were black libraries admitted. One explanation may be the emphasis on institutional members. With a limited number of institutions devoted to the education of African American health professionals, there was less pressure to admit their libraries. However, it must be said that the personal beliefs of some MLA members, including

leaders in the association, also slowed the process.

Under MLA policy, library members, rather than individual members, possessed voting rights. The Membership Committee solicited new library members, and the Executive Committee approved each application. Libraries were required to meet collection and staffing standards to ensure that they would be full participants in the work of the association. In particular, MLA was concerned that they contribute to the Exchange, the centralized exchange of duplicate medical literature among members. Various types of libraries were excluded or discouraged at times—including corporate, foreign, and dental libraries—primarily due to doubts that they could serve as partners in the Exchange. However, black libraries were excluded for another reason; as the chairman of the Executive Committee wrote to the chairman of the Membership Committee, "the first objection is, of course, purely social and exists only because we are such a small organization" [6].

Throughout the 1930s, the libraries of Meharry Medical College and Howard University School of Medicine attempted to join MLA but were excluded. The Executive Committee was described as having voted on the question three times [7] and having discussed it at every meeting for nine years [8]. There was some confusion about the unofficial "code." Howard was apparently solicited in 1934 [9], and subsequent instructions for a newly appointed Membership Committee member contained the admonition not to "solicit libraries of colored medical schools and of commercial companies" [10].

By 1939, the effort to resolve the issue over whether to admit Howard and Meharry seemed carefully organized. Perhaps some in MLA felt the action was inevitable and correct. The president of Meharry wrote to MLA to ask if an appli-

cation for membership would be considered, after the denial of a few years earlier, describing the strides made in developing its library and the need for access to the Exchange list [11]. A representative of the Rockefeller Foundation wrote in support of the Meharry application. He noted that Howard had unsuccessfully applied four years earlier, and, that although some other point was involved, the real trouble lay in the race problem; he urged that the two libraries be admitted [12].

Janet Doe, as secretary of MLA, distributed the letters to the Executive Committee and polled them on two questions: "a) Shall Meharry Medical College Library be admitted? b) If so, shall other negro libraries be advised of our change of policy?" [13]. The results "to admit negro libraries to membership provided they meet regular requirements" were 6 voting yes, 2 no, and 1 not voting. On the second question, there was a tie of 4 yes votes and 4 no, with 1 not voting [14].

Mary Louise Marshall, by then chairman of the Executive Committee, explained her abstention in impassioned letters that reflected the convictions of others in MLA correspondence.

As a scientific body there is of course no reason for the exclusion of negro library members. On the other hand one of the principal advantages of our Association,—I might even say its greatest advantage, has been the opportunity which has been offered for close acquaintance with others in our field, and the amalgamation of our whole group . . . With my head I know this is a wrong attitude, and with my heart I regret it from the bottom of my heart, but I truly believe a serious social problem will be created for our meetings if negro librarians come to our meetings, and become a part of our group. [15]

To her credit, once the decision to admit the libraries was made, Marshall supported it with equal vigor. Two members wrote to her recommending that the question be put to the entire MLA membership by secret ballot [16, 17], and the

MLA president cautioned her that the association should proceed carefully in light of "passive opposition in the air" [18].

Marshall responded to each correspondent with similar, long letters. She stressed the finality of the decision by the Executive Committee—its authority, the thorough deliberation over the years, and the overwhelming vote to proceed. She argued that the black libraries must have membership with no restrictions, including representation at meetings, not just Exchange privileges as some opponents had suggested. The association's attitude was hindering its efforts to secure foundation support for endowment of the Exchange. She also outlined reasons that the decision would work—the unlikely case that similar libraries would become eligible and the acceptance into the Association of American Medical Colleges and American College of Surgeons of black members (and, according to her, the acceptance of those members of segregated meeting sites). Despite her personal dread, in her role as chairman, she felt that MLA's "prime motives are not social" and that MLA should follow "practically all national medical and scientific associations [in] accept[ing] colored memberships" [19].

Doe, who had supported the admission, wrote to Marshall in a personal note: "There are bound to be some complications, but we sincerely hope they won't be as serious as if the principle of impartial treatment were not accepted" [20].

Meharry and Howard were admitted as library members for the 1939/40 year [21], and a Howard librarian attended the 1940 Annual Meeting [22].

However, some evidence conflicts with the timeline described above. Howard was listed as a new library member approved by the Executive Committee in 1929/30 and on internal membership lists for 1931 and 1933, disappearing after that point [23–25]. There was no clarification found while researching this column, and no indication during the controversy that Howard

had once been a member. One possible explanation is that it was a technical way for the library to take advantage of the Exchange, and that the designation was later reconsidered. Eileen Cunningham, in a letter during this period supporting a membership application from Meharry, noted that Howard, as a comparable library, was participating in the Exchange [26].

Rachael Anderson, in her Janet Doe Lecture in 1989, described the long-term effects of racial prejudice on librarianship and in MLA.

The deeply felt, negative, personal convictions of several individuals who were among the association's most active members and leaders for another generation betoken a continuing inhospitable climate for recruiting minorities to the field for many years thereafter . . . We can ask ourselves with regard to both major societal issues—gender and race—to what extent we are now reaping the consequences of our profession's past inhospitality to women and minorities. [27]

Editor's note

Part II of this column will focus on the involvement of the library profession in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s and will be published in a future issue.

Acknowledgments

Two works provided inspiration to pursue this topic and pointed to sources in the historical record: Rachael K. Anderson's "Reinventing the Medical Librarian" and Kenneth F. Kister's biography *Eric Moon: The Life and Library Times*.

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6. DARRACH MJ. Letter to M Marshall.* 19 Feb 1935. (Medical Library Association archives, series 17, box 243. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

7. MARSHALL ML. Letter to J Doe. 23 Mar 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

8. MARSHALL ML. Letter to HW Jones. 6 Nov 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

9. DARRACH, op. cit.

10. MARSHALL M.* Letter to LP Braden. 19 Nov 1935. (Medical Library Association archives, series 17, box 243. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

11. TURNER EL. Letter to J Doe. 3 Mar 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Man-

uscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

12. LAMBERT RA. Letter to J Doe. 8 Mar 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

13. MEDICAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION. Executive Committee circular. 16 Mar 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

14. MEDICAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION. Executive Committee circular. 27 Apr 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

15. MARSHALL, Letter to J Doe, op. cit.

16. [NAYLOR] M. Letter to [ML] Marshall. 18 Oct 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

17. [KING] L[DC]. Letter to ML Marshall. 19 Oct 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

18. JONES HW. Letter to ML Marshall. 2 Nov 1939. (Medical Library Association archives, series 99, box 155. Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of

Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.)

19. MARSHALL, Letter to HW Jones, op. cit.

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21. Reports of officers and committees. *Bull Med Libr Assoc* 1940 Oct;29(1):31-53.

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27. ANDERSON RK. Reinventing the medical librarian. *Bull Med Libr Assoc* 1989 Oct;77(4):323-31.

* M Marshall is Madeline Marshall, not Mary Louise Marshall.