Overseas Librarians: “The specter of voluntarism and the hobgoblin of non-professionalism”

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\textsuperscript{1} Pixler, R.. (1978). Personally rewarding, but—ACTION can be hazardous to your career. American Libraries, 9, 11, 612.
Abstract

The following paper is on working abroad in a foreign country. It focuses primarily on Peace Corps volunteers—how they become involved with library development, what practices they instigate to promote the library’s collection, and how they create sustainability for the library. All of these elements combine, in my thesis, to show the “professional” nature of an overseas librarian. I argue that the perception of overseas librarians goes through peaks and valleys— the wartime conditions fostered international cooperation between allied powers and thus overseas librarians during the 1940’s were perceived as facilitators of international communication, the 1970’s were a slump in America’s xenophobic/egocentric history, and the past decade and a half has shown remarkable talent flourishing in foreign climes with the overall respect for overseas librarians on the upswing.
Overseas Librarians:

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In The 1970’s, a returned librarian volunteer stated that potential employers found her professionalism to be questionable. I would argue that this trend began at the end of the 1960’s/beginning of the 1970’s. During World War II and immediately following it, the status of librarians being sent abroad and working overseas was much higher. I believe that in a cycle, where the 1970’s were a decided slump, the recognition for returned overseas volunteer librarians is again on the rise. In more recent decades, as international awareness has increased, the perception of an international librarian has also gained a heavy coating of professional gloss. In my paper, I will demonstrate, by copious examples, the roles volunteer librarians play abroad around the world and how their experience contributed to both their professional and personal development.

The importance of this topic should be obvious. Respect for librarians who volunteer to work abroad should be no different than that held by librarians who stay within the United States to ply their trade. If anything, it should potentially be greater for the number of obstacles that overseas librarians face which state-bound librarians know nothing of. In some of my examples I will showcase librarians who carry stones to help build a structure which will house the books, librarians who teach children how to write and illustrate their own books so that the village will have some, and librarians who convince entire communities that a library will help them develop as a nation. In a conference address, a professor and associate dean of Simmons College in Boston discussed the importance of the qualified professional assisting the developing nation to
advance. He asserted that “given this wide gap between the developing and the developed
countries, I submit that it is much more difficult to be an effective and efficient information
professional in the developing countries,” (Chen, 1985, p. 40). A sentiment which is echoed by a
volunteer librarian who was stationed in Nigeria:

I returned home with a deeper appreciation for my own work situation—we have few
difficulties to contend with compared to those I experienced in Nigeria. I came home
with a greater appreciation for the missionaries who work in difficult situations and
improvise daily to keep a library operating. (Mann, 1991, p. 7)

It is important to keep in mind that the gap between developed and developing has not
closed in recent years—if anything, it has widened as some countries surge ahead, others fall
further and further behind. One librarian noted that “literacy and the concomitant of literacy,
books, readers, and readily available libraries, were basic keys to the problem, and until that key
was turned the backward countries would fall more and more behind the developed countries,”
(Gardner, 1964, p. 26). One of the factors in diminishing the gap, then, has often been
considered to be education.

In Africa, for example, John Strickland, the Director of Library Services in Sierra Leone
once said, “to the African there is one pre-requisite that is basic to all development—education.
He knows that it is education that gives the white man his superiority, and he is prepared to make
any sacrifice to obtain it,” (Dudley, 1964, p. 62). A tribal African was quoted as saying, “The
day of the spear has gone; the day of the book has come,” (Dudley, 1964, p. 63). The importance
of libraries comes in here as even if the problem of illiteracy is alleviated, the progress will be
erased if the populace has no books to read:
Throughout Africa people are being helped by mass education programmes to emerge from illiteracy and ignorance, and they need continued access to suitable publications, stimulation of their reading interests and experienced reading guidance to sharpen their new skills into an effective instrument of self-education. Only a few new literates are now served by public libraries, and if the others do not in the near future have access to such services, most will probably stagnate or slide back into illiteracy, thereby wasting the efforts expanded by themselves and their teachers. (UNESCO, 1954, p. 14)

The library is the solution which will maintain and further develop the education of the nation. And, however egotistical it may be to say, American librarians must be at the forefront of this movement as their privileged background as members of a great world power prepare them to assert the natural rights to education for other nationalities. For, “when a man learns to read, write, and reckon, a great burden of inferiority is lifted from his shoulders and he sees the prospect of progress and civilization within his grasp,” (UNESCO, 1954, p. 32). It is towards this end that I see international librarianship striving as a profession. The efforts of the few who attempt to connect all civilization through literacy and shared understanding should be lauded—and that is the point my paper strives to make.

To return, for a moment, to the instigator of all this who claimed that volunteer librarians received no respect—Rebecca Pixler (1978), was a volunteer librarian in the 1970’s. She worked for VISTA, a federal volunteer organization comparable to the Peace Corps. Rebecca was sent to Alaska to work for the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights in Juneau where she performed library duties organizing the commission’s resource material. She writes that when she, and others like her, returned to the continental US they “bring with them increased self confidence and pride in their achievements and skills in human interaction—all summarized in
newly expanded resumes” (1978, p. 610). However, it’s only a matter of time before the job search wears down that shiny idealism and some volunteers end up taking Peace Corps off their resume. Another veteran of working abroad is quoted in Pixler’s article as saying, “The returnee is treated as an ordinary beginner;” and though the employers deem the experience as “interesting” they state that it “didn’t mean much in terms of professional ability of competence [so] I stopped putting ‘Peace Corps’ at the head of my resume” (p. 611). Pixler continues by describing some of the prejudices she sees Americans holding towards volunteer workers,

Many Americans stereotype Peace Corps workers as mud-hovel dwellers and VISTAs as starry-eyed do-gooders of dubious competence…Some librarians assume their ACTION colleagues’ professional work consists of presiding over a shelf of books in an illiterate village or conducting book drives for the natives. Actually ACTION librarians are more likely to be found classifying maps in Jamaica, conducting cataloguing seminars in Paraguay, identifying incunabula in Colombia, training staff in Morocco, or answering specialized reference questions in Alaska. (p. 611)

The problem here in the 70’s and also, to a degree, in the 1960’s when the Peace Corps was instituted, is that American were both isolated and xenophobic, for the most part. The xenophobia of Americans was recognized in the 1940’s but the problem remained insurmountable for several decades. However, one author, in 1944, stated that:

Our own librarians can profit from foreign experience. Most of us are relatively provincial…One or more years of work or study in some foreign country, whether in a library or not, would be an asset to any American librarian. It is generally accepted that international exchange of librarians is always mutually advantageous, for, regardless, of
what the librarian learns or does not learn about library methods and service, he cannot fail to increase his usable knowledge of the country he visits. (Milam, 1944, p. 105).

Unfortunately the advice was still being promoted in the mid-60’s and only loosely followed as the British Library Association advocated at a conference in 1964, “Indeed, and early period of service overseas by a young librarian should be regarded as a professional cachet and not as a liability” (Baumfield, 1964, p. 65).

Another article has interviews with returned Peace Corps volunteers describing their return reception as only marginally curious and primarily self-absorbed. One volunteer puts it as:

I find most people very curious and seemingly interested in my Peace Corps experience—up to a certain point. I limit my replies to their inquiries to one-sentence answers. People seem to like to hear about my experience—but only briefly. (p. Calvert, 1966, 109)

Another says much the same, but adds some comments about the lack of understanding on the part of those who have never left their own country—possibly even their own state:

I find an attitude of general interest, but no real enthusiasm and little understanding about the aims and programs of the Peace Corps. Questions about the Peace Corps often concern salary and vacation. Living in the rural areas of an underdeveloped Asian country is totally out of the realm of experience of any American I have met so far. This experience for me is a difficult one to express. (Calvert, 1966, p. 109)

It took time, and moreover, travel for the world-view of most Americans to accept and understand the stories of returned volunteers. In the last 15 years the Peace Corps has gotten a lot of good press in the form of books written by returned volunteers. In a merger of travel
writing and altruism, the idealism of volunteering is able to capture the imagination of many readers. In addition, the exploits of returned volunteers in the 90’s and forward are no longer a hindrance in the job search. One returned volunteer turned author says in 1990:

Peace Corps experience is regarded very positively by most employers, especially in the field of education…People in government and industry recognize the challenges you’ve overcome living two years in another culture. They know the flexibility and resiliency that develops when you have to constantly deal with a bureaucratic institution, under less than ideal conditions, that are draining to say the least. (Amin, 1990, p. 153)

Speaking from personal (though second-hand) experience, I know when my cousin and his wife returned in 2005 from Peace Corps service in Ukraine, that his experiences from that two year period are what guaranteed his acceptance to a position with the United States Government in Washington, D.C. So even though the respect and understanding for volunteers has gone up in the past decade, the question remains as to why it disappeared in the first place.

In a way, I believe that librarianship as an overseas profession suffered in the 1970’s because going abroad meant one less librarian working in the States. This is a faulty trap which must be kept in mind now and in the future. After all, the world of libraries and books is interconnected across the globe. This was understood and appreciated during WWII when information slipped through the cracks. Hundreds of periodicals lost months of issues or faced outright cancellation because of bombing, destruction, and lack of funding. The archives of many countries steadily fell behind as they had no access to the seller. Even our own country “has incomplete files for the war years” (Milam, 1944, p. 100). In Japan, for example, the country suffered from “the total or partial destruction by bombing or more than one-third of the prefecture libraries and of many important municipal libraries together with the loss of half the
total book stocks of Japan.” (Keeney, 1948, p. 32). In Poland before the German invasion, scholars examined the Polish libraries and catalogued the valuable items and “after the invasion these scholars were sent to gather up the loot [and] in many cases the stolen collections are now secreted in the private homes of Germans, where they will be difficult or impossible to find after Germany is defeated” (Milam, 1944, p. 100). According to Keeney’s article on the rebuilding of the Japanese public libraries, “public-spirited citizens” were urged to donate portions of their private collections to the libraries in order to replenish the empty shelves, (Keeney, 1948, p. 32). Realistically, though, a lot more help was going to be needed. It’s situations such as these—in the aftermath of war—that localized citizens are not going to be enough, a world-conscious citizen needs to emerge. Perhaps a global librarian could fill that role. Certainly the ALA, and various American private and governmental associations, took a hefty part of the share in helping to sustain libraries around the world during the war. Indeed, the ALA left behind an immense legacy from the pre-war and wartime years in developing the library profession as a world-wide force to be reckoned with. The American Library Association, in those years, occupied a unique position as a voluntary organization, able to bring to bear on a worldwide basis its expertise and ideals. It was a singular period...a period during which its influence in government and foundation circles and abroad, reached an apogee in ways not again attained and when American librarianship achieved a new respectability and recognition as a profession with cultural and intellectual significance to the world.

(Kraske, 1985, p. 10)

However, the ALA’s status as a world player quickly fell apart at the end of WWII when the State Department took over most of the international outreach efforts and the funding by the Rockefeller Foundation was withdrawn. My conjectures is that it was at this point, when there
was no longer an overarching institutional body supporting international librarianship, that the status of overseas librarians began to lose its luster. Even the advent of the Peace Corps in 1961, did little, at first, to highlight the illustrious benefits of being a librarian abroad. A portion of the blame for this can perhaps be chalked up to how few volunteers were assigned librarian positions—in general, the volunteer took up library development as a sideline project. It is only in more recent decades that the need for internationally aware librarians has grown and become of paramount importance.

The need was vividly felt in the 1940’s during a time of great discord among different countries, which is perhaps another reason it is felt again now so strongly. When so many things divide us, it’s important to find something that can unite us. In 1944, Carl Hastings Milam wrote that books have an inherent value in “increasing respect for the cultural life of the country which produced them. Such understanding and respect may help substantially to build the foundations for permanent peace and for the further advancement of civilization,” ( p. 102). Queen Noor al Hussein of Jordan echoes this belief in the promise of peace in reference to Peace Corps workers:

Lessons from our region show that peace must be built between peoples. It derives from understanding, trust, and a sense of working toward a shared destiny. It arises only out of mutual and equitable exchange of skills, of ideas, of cultural values. Peace Corps Volunteers—going where they are invited; bringing open minds, dedication, and enthusiasm; living and working side by side with their hosts; and returning with new perspectives to share with those at home—are among the best examples of how that peace will be achieved. (Peace Corps, 2006, p. 56)

The combination of these two things—volunteer service and libraries—is one which is illustrative of the connection that can be forged between multiple countries. Libraries bridge the
national gaps by holding within their walls materials from around the world, while a volunteer is an individual without borders. The point of volunteering is to share your own country with another while learning about it and taking back a part of it back to your country when you leave. The goal of libraries and librarians should be to assist in forging ties across all boundaries in the endeavor to preserve and disseminate world knowledge. Another way to put this is that libraries “are independent entities compromising an organic network of institutions scattered throughout the world [while] requiring a cooperative environment to function efficiently,” (Tsuneishi, 1993, p. 19). I find that it helps to think of this in terms of a goal—the goal being free knowledge available around the world. In this instance, “the library should be regarded not as an institution, nor as a service, not as a building, but as a symbol of our aspiration,” (Benge, 1984, p. 219).

As aspirations go, this one is quite admirable. Which is why I feel devoted followers of it who are actually working towards it within developing nations deserve respect. In the next section of the paper, I will describe a few individuals whose stories I have happened upon during my research. Each individual has served as a volunteer (Peace Corps, religious, or other) in a foreign country. These articles ranged in information from describing the physical dimensions of a library in the Philippines to teaching children to hand-make books in the African bush. Each account is entertaining and thought provoking. Almost all the literature stresses the importance and benefits of creating and maintaining libraries around the globe. Edwina Mann (1991) says, “Working in a third world country will expand your world view and probably change your outlook on life” (p. 5), while Miranda Doyle (2000) gives a heartfelt reason for her work, “It breaks my heart to imagine what it must be like to grow up without books; I think that’s one of the main reasons I volunteered for this job” (p. 52). Each article has traces of the maudlin in their recounting of their experiences abroad, but at the core of each author’s effort to relate these
life-changing stories is the sense that they were doing something incredibly important to promote international literacy and easy access to books in places where some individuals had never even seen a book.

Katie McClurg (2000), a Peace Corps volunteer in Namibia, writes on the joy she feels at helping to build a community library. She states how they “look forward to the day when the children can check out a book and take it home to read. The desire to read and write in Ruacana is very strong; it is just so difficult to become literate when you haven’t enough books to support those efforts” (p. 20-21). On the flip side from this, there is one article by a librarian who went to Turkey with her husband to work at the American Collegiate Institute, a prestigious private secondary school. There the library had “state-the-art technology…which was utilized by the students to the fullest extent” (Torrez, 2001, p. 70). These two extremes encompass all the myriad variations that occur in other countries at various times. In order to give a more in-depth study of the experiences each volunteer had, I would like to describe in greater detail the trials they faced. The experiences can be broken down in to three basic stages: an assessment of the resources and funding available, the tactics employed to create and/or develop a library, and the results achieved from hard work.

To give a few examples of the resources some librarians began with and the process they went through to figure out the best way to organize a collection, let me cite a few cases. Ann Charles Watt, a PCV in Paraguay, and her co-author, Judith K. Myers (2002), pose some of these questions in the introduction to their article: “Where will the library be? How will we pay for a building and a librarian’s salary? How will books be organized?” (p. 18). An example of what a librarian might face in one of these foreign assignments can be seen in Sam Werberg (1998) who was stationed in Morocco. He worked at the university in Fez with 9,000 books in English and
approximately 30,000 in French and Arabic. They were not properly classified or stored. There was a lack of conservation techniques and reference service was non-existent. Werberg’s goals were to organize the card catalog, write out (by hand) cards for books that had none, and use donated UNESCO software to create a computerized version of the catalog. In the process he discovered that 25% of the cards in the catalog had no corresponding book on the shelf and 25% had no card in the catalog. Werberg writes that though, “These may sound like very mundane tasks, but from where I’m sitting, this is the frontier of the Information Age,” (p. 57). This goes back to the haves and have-nots of developed vs. developing countries. Werberg could say that Fez in 1998 was the frontier of the IT with a computer running Windows 95 in Arabic, because at the time it was.

Compared to Kati McClurg, who was mentioned above, a computer and 39,000 books would have been a futuristic fantasy. McClurg, who spent 2000 in Ruacana, Namibia visited different rural primary schools every day of the work week. When she first got there most of the schools had zero books so she began a program of teaching the children how to write and illustrate their own picture books. Another Peace Corps volunteer, Jennifer Gibson in Palau, Micronesia, was faced with the same problem of book scarcity so she also encouraged students to make their own, “She also had the 8th-graders interview their parents, write up their interviews, and make them into books,” (Cassell, 1999, p. 58). Gibson had a relatively easy job gaining funding for further projects as Micronesia was still a US territory in 1999. Kati McClurg, on the other hand, worked extremely hard to gain international support for developing a library and managed to acquire book donors from companies and private individuals. They also secured grant money and other financial donations to build the library. In addition, scholarships were arranged to send Namibians to the University of Namibia to get Library
Science certificates, (McClurg, 2000, pp. 18-21). It’s the scholarships that are one of the most important items to note. Helping to develop a library in a foreign country is all well and good, but if the volunteer does not take sustainability into account, all efforts are merely a waste for when they leave, the library will fail without trained professionals to take over the operation of it.

A second Namibian library was co-build by Carrie Sampson, a Peace Corps worker in northern Namibia. The Oshikango Resource Center is built out of beer bottles and concrete and was built solely by the women of the town. As of 1997, the library held 10,000 books solicited by Sampson from contacts in the United States, (American Libraries, 1997, p. 31). It is amazing what can be accomplished by finding generous donors back in the States to support fledgling libraries. The same can be seen of Jennifer Dean, another Peace Corps volunteer in Bomet, Kenya, who managed to acquire two-and-a-half tons of books from her home-town of Wheaton, IL. Her mother spearheaded the book drive which brought in “children’s literature, encyclopedias, fiction, romance novels, and magazines donated by individuals, schools, clubs, churches, and libraries,” (American Libraries, 1996, p. 23). Service clubs in the States sometimes donate more than just books or money. For example, a Rotary Club in Michigan donated a 20-year-old bookmobile to Belize—the first in the country. They even drove the 2,600 miles to deliver it in a caravan that included “school buses, fire engines, and ambulances,” (American Libraries, 1994, p. 614).

A library in Palo, Philippines, had a sponsor from Palo Alto, CA called Neighbor’s Abroad. The library is a “plain but modern concrete building” with “space for six large wooden shelves and six long tables where children sit to read, color, or play games,” (Doyle, 2000, p. 50). When the librarian, Miranda Doyle, first arrived, “the library had only two wicker shelves. The bug-eaten books were arranged according to size, not subject or author,” (p. 50). She and a
local co-worker created book pockets from scrap paper and made labels on a typewriter for the books. There are now 3,500 titles, mostly in English, and primarily donated by Neighbors Abroad. Doyle states that:

Running a library in a developing country, I find myself “making do” in ways I had never imagined. Other than my laptop, the library has no computers. Instead of searching the Web to answer reference questions, I rely on several aging sets of encyclopedias. Instead of accessing patron records, I flip through the borrower’s cards fastened with paper clips and filed in a wooden box. (p. 50)

Doyle is also training a replacement for when she leaves so that the library will not be left in the lurch and she comments that even after she’s gone the library will still have the support of the whole community as it does now. Community members “have done everything from building shelves to landscaping the library grounds,” (p. 52).

Another example of community involvement can be seen in Melang, Nepal where Chip Barnett (2001) was sent as a Peace Corps volunteer. He describes a memory of hauling rocks down a small mountain with which the library will be built. He shared this task with many, including the village men, a 7th-grade boy, a 9th-grade girl, and a 75 year old woman—all of whom carried more rocks in one trip than him. Melang has no “telephones, electricity, heat, running water, or toilets,” so a library is a real luxury, (p. 46). Barnett admits that he had trouble convincing the village to go along with his library building plan. However, once he created a tiny, 100 book collection for his middle school and the students were bringing books home, a desire for a community library grew. Interestingly, the vast majority of interest was in the Nepali books rather than the English ones—“not even the gorgeous, full-color dinosaur books,” (p. 47). It turned out the main reason for this was because the American books were too big and heavy,
after all, “when you walk to school in flip-flops up and down mountains for up to and hour-and-a-half each way, you have a different perspective,” (p. 47). Even with these trials, the desire for more books was unstoppable and a deputation from the village, along with Barnett, was sent to Kathmandu to deplete the bookstore’s selection as a starter pack of books. Barnett won funding from the Peace Corps and the United States Agency for International Development to create a 1,000 book public library in the village as well as a 450 book library in the high school down the mountain. The public library was staffed by 10 volunteers that Barnett trained and open five days a week for two hours a day, drawing a daily average of 24 users, (p. 48).

In two more African examples, one in Rwanda and one in Nigeria, libraries in University settings had very different collections. In Rwanda at the University in Ruhengeri in 1991 there were 60,000 books but minimal periodicals. The library at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, the largest seminary in Africa, had 34,000 books in 1991, and 30 journal subscriptions. However, the “toll of continuous heat, dust, and humidity was evident,” (Mann, 1991, p. 6). The job of Edwina Walls Mann (1991) in Nigeria was to catalog a special gift collection of 200 volumes that had never been integrated into the library because of staff shortages, (p. 6). In Rwanda foreign aid came from Germany, France, Belgium, England, and America, which supplied many basic books including textbooks which “are priced far out of reach of Rwandan students,” (Simpson, 1991, p. 13).

Foreign aid is an integral part of library development, as can be seen by these few examples. One of the most significant programs launched by the Peace Corps is the Partnership Program—which helps volunteers and their communities to obtain funds that can be used for community-initiated projects. In two years the Partnership Program “helped more than 50 communities in 24 countries to build new libraries, renovate existing libraries, and purchase
books to stock them,” (Fjeld, 2006, p. 41). Peace Corps volunteer, Marcus Gaudet, said of the Partnership Program:

The major success of this project [is] kids playing with puzzles or didactic games on the floor, students studying for class, parents seated on the sofa reading a book, the smiles and pride, the feeling that the community accomplished something so big, so great in their lifetime. (Fjeld, 2006, p. 41)

On the complete other end of the spectrum, a librarian working in Shiraz, Iran at Pahlavi University, writes that “Money was no problem, since the oil consortium had given Pahlavi University a quarter of a million dollars for developing a basic undergraduate library collection over a three year period,” (Deale, 1967, p. 446). This situation is quite the reverse of a required community-wide support of building a nine-by-twelve structure out of beer bottles and concrete, but it is still a valid example of what working abroad can be like—and what, hopefully, it might be like for every librarian some day, not having to worry about money!

As can be seen by these examples, there are a wide variety of opportunities to work in libraries abroad. You can work in the bush teaching children to build their own story-books because none exist, you can work in a library where US non-profits send donations of books which need to be catalogued and shelved, or you can work in a well-established institution where the library has advanced technology and a cataloging system already in place. Some of these librarians had ramshackle buildings in which to house the books already built and some helped build a structure themselves. Sometimes books were housed in a town elder’s house until the librarian came along—sometimes in a broom closet. Each individual has a different experience that is unique to their time and location—but each seems to have only positive things to say about their time spent working abroad. Sarah Prescott (2001) puts it better than I can:
I have been an international librarian for four years. Parts of the adventure have been exhilarating and other parts harrowing, but I would not erase a single moment, as each one has helped me to grow in my understanding of people and thus, I believe, has made me a better librarian. (p. 50)

In addition to the pride these overseas librarians return with in the work they have done, some also continue their support of the libraries they’ve left behind.

Two marvelous examples of librarians who continue to support the libraries they helped to start are Laura Wendell and Ann Easterly. When Laura Wendell returned from her Peace Corps term of duty in Togo, she set up a non-profit called World Library Partnerships (WLP). WLP is meant to “develop partnerships between US libraries and small libraries in developing countries,” (Cassell, 1999, p. 56). The partnerships are usually between school libraries or public libraries and the requirements to join are that the “US library partner will hold one fundraiser a year to raise at least $500 for its library partner,” (p. 56). Wendell claims that, “Sending books from the US is not the aim of this project, but rather getting money to the partner library so that they can buy books from local publishers in the indigenous language,” (p. 56).

One can find out more about WLP on the Web at http://www.RTPnet.org/~wlp.

Ann Easterly is an example of one of the earliest Peace Corps volunteers sent abroad. She went to Liberia in 1966, just five years after the Peace Corps had formed. Though she had a love/hate relationship with Liberia due to its civil war, Easterly always longed to do more to help those she had left behind. At her retirement party in 2001, a wealthy patron asked her what she planned to do next and what she would want to do if money wasn’t an object. She said that she’d send books to Africa. After discussing the details and costs, the patron offered to fund her enterprise and African Children’s Libraries (ACL) as born. Just four days after sealing the deal,
17 boxes of books were in the mail en route to Nigeria. However, Easterly wasn’t finished with just that, she “wanted to return to Liberia, books in hand. She wanted to raise libraries from scratch, to inspire another generation of children,” (Duin, 2006, p. 1). Luckily, getting books wasn’t a problem due to the lack of space in Portland for schools to store old books. Donations were given at such a tremendous rate that shipping them became the biggest problem. In February 2006, 15,000 books were sent in a container shipment—“enough to start 11 new libraries and restock several others,” (p. 1). After shipping the books off, Easterly left for Foequelleh to meet them when they arrived. On her first return visit to Liberia since she worked for the Peace Corps, Easterly had this to say, “The village hasn’t changed much, except for the stories people tell, and the scars that make you realize people have been through some terrible stuff,” (p. 1). Ann Easterly will be returning to Liberia again in August 2007 and more information can be found at her Web site, http://www.africanchildrenslibraries.org.

In addition to the two webpages mentioned so far, there are several other avenues by which the interested can become further involved in working in and with foreign libraries. For example, the majority of international schools hire through recruiting fairs, to which anyone who cares to subscribe can attend. Sarah Prescott (2001), a journalist and overseas librarian, states that for librarians the hiring fairs are a good bet as the process is not as competitive as it is for teachers, “recruiters will often sit up and take notice when librarians approach them, as these positions are often hard to fill,” (p. 49). She cautions, however, that it is important to “ask many questions and never accept an offer on the spot,” (p. 49). It’s best to know exactly what you’re getting in to, before signing up to depart the country for a two-year contract abroad. Prescott also gives five of the most important qualities for an overseas librarian to possess:
Flexibility/adaptability: Can you read a story loudly enough to drown out a group of chattering monkeys sitting outside in the palm trees?

Resiliency: Can you work without air conditioning for eight hours in the heat of summer?

Creativity: Can you create bulletin boards with only black paper and dried out markers?

Risk-taking ability: Can you change a light bulb while standing on an old chair on a rickety table on the crooked floor of the library?

Sense of humor: Can you laugh when your computer goes up in smoke? (p. 50)

This list hearkens back to the thesis of this paper as they display the qualities of a librarian working overseas in a highly unorthodox position from her colleagues back home. It stresses, though, that these are the things an overseas employer will be looking for in a librarian and that in order to fulfill their professional obligations, they will have to be adaptable and innovative.

Overseas librarians are not, after all, your typical librarian. Miranda Doyle (2000), whose experiences in the Philippines I described above, wrote that:

Much of what I learned in library school seems irrelevant here. For example, I do little reference work, answering only one or two homework questions a day...Since all of our books are donated, I don’t do any book selection. I do, however, spend plenty of time assigning Dewey numbers to new books and struggling to keep them in order on the shelves. (p. 52)

Without reference work or collection development, is Doyle still a professional librarian? She does do cataloging, after all, but more than that she supports the core component of a librarian’s job description—offering free access to knowledge. Melvil Dewey said in 1919 that American
librarians needed to be “missionaries of the book” and that they could do this by seizing the opportunity for international cooperation, (Kraske, 1985, p. 5). By sharing what we have to those who want it, librarianship expands its own borders into a global profession that risks less chance of stagnation by the influx of innovation necessary to survive in a foreign climate.

In a conference held in 1971, when overseas librarians were often dismissed as not on a par with the librarians in the states, a paper was presented that offers some valid social commentary. In the paper, William F. Birdsall (1971), a doctoral candidate, discussed the advent of public libraries within Massachusetts in 1851. The Massachusetts Law of 1851 which authorized public libraries stated in its preamble:

the necessity for the diffusion of knowledge to protect the peoples’ freedom, to equalize social advantage, to aid their industrial success, and to encourage physical, intellectual, and moral growth…and concluded ‘There is no way in which this can be done so efficiently, conveniently, and economically as by the formation, increase and perpetuation of public libraries’. (p. 18)

By showing one version of the American model, one can see how well these facets would translate to a developing nation. All aspects of the “diffusion of knowledge” contribute to the development of the nation and her populace. However, since it’s 1971 and working abroad in a developing nation is seen as something to be vaguely ashamed of, the author also questions whether or not the needier countries really require the services of a library/librarian. He writes:

A basic assumption of librarianship is that libraries have some role to play in society.

While we can point to particular objectives such as the collection of scholarly material, popular education, and others, we cannot be absolutely sure whether these objectives are valid at this time for the developing nations. Yet, we seem sure that libraries have an
important role in developing countries. For example, Carl White states that national library development is ‘part of that large task of social engineering which planning literature calls nation-building. (p. 15)

As you can see, Birdsall cites the lack of readiness in the developing nation as a deterrent in its hosting of a library. As the 70’s passed however, I believe it became clear that developing nations were always ready for libraries, and indeed it could be a library that supported their metamorphosis from developing to developed. Just as Massachusetts law in 1851 helped to create the democratic freedom and freedom of knowledge that makes America a great developed nation, volunteer sponsored libraries built overseas can serve the same purpose in their host countries.

Of course, in order to facilitate this change, the overseas librarian has to be incredibly innovative and culturally aware. From an anthropological standpoint, Charles Erasmus made the point that,

foreign advisors who are attempting to implement innovations in so-called developing countries have to take account of at least two things: the reactions of the people themselves to these innovations, and whether the mode of introducing the innovations will provoke resistance or, on the other hand, encourage acceptance. (Elmendorf, 1971, p. 39)

This explains why overseas librarians must be so very different from their counterparts at home. They need to adapt to the needs of the potential library patrons and embrace their inner innovator even if that is contrary to the stateside image of a professional librarian.

In conclusion, I’d like to return to the article by Rebecca Pixler (1978). As the main claimant of overseas librarians ill repute, she attempts to offer explanations for exactly why she
and her compatriots are, indeed, professionals in their field. In sentiment her argument follows much the same lines as I’ve outlined above, but turns the table on the state-side librarian. The professional in the States, in contrast to the counterpart in a foreign country, is not innovative, is, in fact, stagnating in a bureaucratic morass which could be alleviated by taking a page from the overseas librarian’s book and ushering in an age of cutting-edge librarians who innovate and create wonder for their patrons. Within the LIBR 200 class at San Jose State, much time was spent on the derogatory stereotypes held against librarians. Pixler picks up on that and cites a critic as writing on the topic that professional librarians share “an apparent general tendency to avoid limitations, squelch creative change, delay decisions, and rigidify the hierarchies of authority that exist,” (p. 612). In contrast to this Pixler writes of the volunteer librarian abroad as stressing “individual (perhaps idiosyncratic) action, conducted with personal creativity and with minimum collegial contacts,” (p. 612). Here the emphasis devolves onto “library service over any question of personal status,” (p. 612). It’s my opinion that as the world became more integrated in the 1990’s and 21st century, professional librarianship has become more about the service over status. This is why returned volunteers receive a better field of job opportunities upon their return, and why more and more people are interested in hearing all the details of their life abroad. As one librarian puts it, “the overseas librarian is an abstraction,…to be more precise there are librarians everywhere: they are all overseas, but some are more overseas than others,” (Dudley, 1964, p. 58).
**References**


Pixler, R. (1978). Personally rewarding, but—ACTION can be hazardous to your career. 

*American Libraries, 9, 11, 610-612.*


