The Battle of the Books: An Examination of Charles Goss

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Abstract

To delve more deeply into the debate that took place in the late 19th century and early 20th century surrounding the introduction of open access shelving in London’s public libraries. Described by The Sun as the “the battle of the books”, Charles Goss, librarian of the Bishopsgate Institute in East London took a clear stance against open access in favour of the Cotgreave Indicator — closed access. Much has been written about James Duff Brown, the pioneer of open access in the U.K., but it is the focus of this article to explore the thoughts and findings of Charles Goss and his opposition to a system that was eventually welcomed by every public library throughout the UK.

Key Words

Charles Goss, James Duff Brown, The Bishopsgate Institute, Lewisham Public Library, open access, closed access, Cotgreave Indicator, Society of Public Librarians (SPL), Library Association (LA).

Introduction

To analyse the public library development that took place between 1890 and 1910 it is
essential to recognise the change in reading habits and practices of the ordinary people. The novel, in particular, not only changed the reading public’s approach to books but it also changed the entire structure of the book industry and the many different relationships between reading habits and the library. The debate between open and closed access has been studied mainly from the advocates of open access. It is the aim of this article to evaluate the reasons behind those advocating closed access and to see if there is corroborating evidence to support their argument. By using the unique resources available at the Bishopsgate Institute, I hope to gain further insight into why Goss continued to favour closed access throughout his tenure at the Bishopsgate. If James Duff Brown heralded a revolution in library practice, what did the advocates of closed access achieve and why were they opposed to the progressive new developments?

Figure 2. James Duff Brown (1862-1914)

The Reading Public

From the 1850s onwards, education became much more prevalent within society regardless of class distinction. The 1855 Public Libraries Act meant libraries could spend money purchasing books rather than relying on contributions from educated members of the upper classes; however the system for buying books was antiquated and it was lamented by many
librarians. The decisions on what books libraries should publish was in the hands of a committee rather than librarians who could only make suggestions of what books to publish. A major factor in this decision must have been the censorship of material, with works by H.G. Wells and other modernist writers forbidden on moral grounds. Murison writes, “the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 served to encourage study among older people” (Murison, 1971, 61). This helped the librarians promote libraries as the “people’s university” (Black, 1996, 210). In 1870 the Elementary Education Act was passed and over the next few years an increased interest around reading of all types was observed. Although there was still objection to the amount of funds public libraries should receive “most of the British public libraries in towns had been founded by 1905” (Murison, 1971, 75). Schooling rarely went past the age of twelve for most children and so the library became incredibly important to their development. Education was improving, but this did not mean the public were reading serious literature. The general public were mainly interested in reading magazines, newspapers and detective novels from writers such as Edgar Wallace and Arthur Conan Doyle. This divided opinion amongst librarians and has become known as “the great fiction question”.

The Great Fiction Question

In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Q.D. Leavis recognises the role of the public library but condemns it as “the chief source for the poorer class of reading-matter in book form” (Leavis, 1965, 5). She goes on to state that “for most people ‘a book’ means a novel” (Leavis, 1965, 6). Reading habits had been revolutionised. For the most part, ordinary working people preferred to read newspapers, magazines and the detective novels of Edgar Wallace than James Joyce or Thomas Hardy. John Carey notes in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* “the difference between the nineteenth-century mob and the twentieth-century mass is literacy” (Carey, 2002, 5). Carey also notes the influential newspaper magnet, Lord Northcliffe who was “giving the public what it wants” as oppose to the intellectuals who were “giving the public what intellectuals want” (Carey, 2002, 6). This applies to the popular novelist as well. On the one hand, we have the intellectuals like D.H Lawrence and H.G.
Wells that hold what Pierre Bourdieu called symbolic capital: the “anti-economic economy of pure art”. On the other, we have Northcliffe and the popular novelists who seek “to make the trade in cultural goods just another trade” (Bourdieu, 1996, 142). Both are of cultural value and T.S Eliot recognises the “continuous graduation of cultural levels” needed in the “structure of society” (Eliot, 1948, 48). The late Stuart Hall talks about the transformation of culture that took place between 1880 and 1920 in his paper “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular”. With this in mind, it is important to ascertain a certain cultural value to the novels of Edgar Wallace, or the contemporary crime writing of Stephen King as their “enhanced or degraded cultural value goes up [and down] the cultural escalator (Hall in Procter, 2004, 28).

Extraordinarily, the question of fiction found James Duff Brown and Charles Goss in agreement. Throughout his career Goss had been a regular contributor to local newspapers on a variety of different subjects from general interest pieces to the history of Crosby Hall. An editor of the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle described Goss as a “zealous contributor, who will ransack a whole library to verify a statement or render an article complete” (Bishopsgate Institute Archives, Charles Goss, Goss 3/2). Whilst serving as librarian in Lewisham, Goss wrote an article for the West Kent Argus in 1894 about the continued influence of novel reading amongst the general public. Goss wrote “novel reading was beneficial because it relaxed the mind. Novels could almost be considered as an agency of education” (Bishopsgate Institute Archives, Charles Goss, Goss 3/3). This is a very advanced view of fiction and one that was not shared by the majority of intellectuals or librarians. It is important to note that Goss’ progressive view of fiction is counterintuitive to his reactionary stance on open access.

The Battle of the Books

Charles William Frederick Goss was born in Denmark Hill in 1864 (Bishopsgate Institute, [online]) but grew up in Tyne and Wear working at the Birkenhead Public Library and at the Newcastle upon Tyne Public Library. However, the focus of this article is on his time spent in London at Lewisham Public Library — chosen from over 300 applicants for the job — and then at the Bishopsgate Institute where he served as chief librarian for forty-four years. A
fascinating reactionary, Goss has largely been forgotten by the history books; the ones he worked so hard to preserve. His life can be pieced together by exploring the archives of the Bishopsgate Institute, examining SPL minute books, press cuttings and personal papers.

His time at Lewisham was seen as a success but the library struggled financially and Goss grew increasingly frustrated at not being able to acquire the books he and his customers wanted: “the library was heavily used, but totally inadequate” (Harris, 1969, 5). During his tenure in Lewisham the public library started to garner attention from the public and consequently the press. Goss regularly wrote pieces for the West Kent Argus about fiction and open access, keeping residents updated, interested and informed on the happenings of the library. The two local newspapers, the Kentish Mercury and the West Kent Argus, took different stances on the importance of the library within the local community. The Argus wanted improved funding for the library whereas the Mercury thought the money could be spent more wisely. Goss eventually had to resign from Lewisham following a dispute with Theophilus Williams (chairman of the public libraries committee) over the role of the public library within society and the services it should provide. The following excerpt is from the Kentish Mercury:

Mr Goss was first coaxed than cajoled, and then coerced into resigning, not of his own free will, or for his own advantage but simply because the endurance of such a tyrannical despotism was quite intolerable to any self-respecting and high-minded man (Kentish Mercury, 6th Aug, 1897, Goss 2/3).

This is particularly important as it was written in the Mercury who opposed some of Goss’ views but, nonetheless, recognised the positive influence he had on the residents of Lewisham. During this time Goss also wrote a new descriptive catalogue to help customers better identify the books they required. This was praised by James Duff Brown, librarian at Clerkenwell Public Library. This would be the last positive correspondence between the two. They would become unbridled in a fierce debate around open and closed access that would divide the British library world.
In 1895, Charles Goss and his deputy Hugh Smith formed the Society of Public Librarians (SPL) in a reaction to the way the Library Association (LA) was running the industry. Another reason for this new body was down to the personal animosity towards the leading members of the LA by Goss and his compatriots. In the society’s inaugural address, Goss spoke of “removing some of the very unjust and improper conditions and restrictions under which the LA is carried on” (SPL inaugural address, 1895, Goss 2/1). James Duff Brown’s response typified the animosity between the two organisations. The SPL was “nothing better than a trade union, formed by jealous and disaffected members of the LA, including the soi-disant Honourable Secretary Mr Goss” (The Library, Dec, 1985, in Harris, 1969, 19, Goss 3/3). Both these statements have an air of truth about them. The SPL’s reasons for forming were as much about the disagreeable personal of the LA as its bad structure and Brown resigned from the LA in 1911 in protest at their policies.

Brown introduced open access to Clerkenwell in 1894, after visiting the American Library Association’s conference in Chicago in 1893. Here, readers were free to select their choices directly from the shelves, encouraging browsing and a new advisory role for librarians. Nearly all of the libraries in Britain employed a closed access system of borrowing. Readers consulted the library catalogue and an indicator system informed them whether the book was in stock. After presenting their choice to the librarian, a member of the library staff retrieved their chosen book. Out of all the systems employed throughout the country, the Cotgreave Indicator — see page seven — was the most commonly used.

Open access was not an entirely new development. Plenty of university libraries had adopted a form of open access. Kelly (1977, 210) noted the similarities to the chained books of medieval times when books could be browsed but not removed. What ensued over the next few years was a fierce battle spearheaded by Brown and Goss, and played out in the pages of The Library — magazine of the LA —, newspapers and other industry publications.
When Goss took over the Bishopsgate Institute in 1897, the library had been operating under the open access system but it had been mismanaged. No safeguarding or guidelines had been put in place and this led to books being damaged and stolen. This only moved to strengthen Goss’ disapproval of open access and in a report of the Bishopsgate from 1898-99, Goss wrote that the “damage was entirely due to the system of open access” (Bishopsgate Institute Archives, Charles Goss, Goss 2/1). James Duff Brown saw Goss’ appointment at the Bishopsgate as a chance to undermine his reputation. Writing in the August edition of The Library in 1898, “It says much for the elasticity of Mr Goss’ conscience
and his accommodating versatility, that he was able to accept an appointment at Bishopsgate; where open access has been adopted by the managers at the outset” (Harris, 1969, 22, Goss 1/4). He went on to accuse Goss of playing “devil’s advocate, in the interests of a gentleman with an indicator for sale” (Harris, 1969, 22, Goss 1/4). Brown was seen to have gone too far in his criticism of Goss, and Goss began proceedings to sue for libel but Brown apologised soon after. This seemingly inherent criticism of each other exemplifies the tension between these two leading practitioners in library services. Goss managed to turn around the fortunes of the Bishopsgate in his own conservative style, issuing large fines for damages and late returns but had to put up with open access, as the governors of the institute would not let him change the system. Bishopsgate finally moved to an indicator system in 1901 “at a cost of £700” which it used until the 1940s (Harris, 1969, 23, Goss 1/4) . This was a step backwards for the library as theft was reduced but use of the library also decreased. The rise of other leisure activities, coupled with the fact that the Bishopsgate was in a particular poor area of London all contributed to its decrease in use. Goss did produce a magnificent catalogue for the institute but he could not and would not change his stance on access.

The opening at the Bishopsgate presented a clear opportunity for Goss to impose his strict guidelines within an open access environment, creating a progressive approach to education in line with his views on fiction but during his time at Bishopsgate he seemed to resent the novel more and more. Ordinary people wanted to use the reading rooms as a place to escape and relax choosing to read newspapers, magazines and novels rather than engage in non-fiction research. Could many of the librarians have shared their distaste of the popular like the modernists? According to Nietzsche “the rabble vomit their bile, and call it a newspaper” (Carey, 2002, 7). Was closed access a reaction to the classes that had no interest in classic literature? This would be too presumptuous a statement but the vast majority of librarians, including Goss were there to serve the best interests of the general public.
In her unpublished thesis of 2006, Michelle Johansen, an employee of the Bishopsgate, makes a critical point that “if the open access movement was liberal, open-handed and designed for the public good. What did this say about the closed method and those who advocated it”? (Johansen, 2006, 20). History paints Mr Brown as a progressive visionary, standing up for the public’s rights of access to education and Goss and his advocates as inveterate in nature and against the formation of educated lower classes, but it was Goss who was in the majority, especially in the 1890s and early 1900s. Robert Snape reports “90% of library professionals were actively antagonistic to [open access]” (Snape, 1995, 56). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that “when Blackpool Public Library undertook a questionnaire survey of librarians attitude towards open access, it received 115 negative responses out of a total of 143” (Snape, 1995, 56). This unwillingness to change was prevalent throughout the industry. Reasons frequently given against open access were the fear of theft, an increase in the borrowing of fiction, increased numbers of staff, more space
required, misplacing of books, over handling and no catalogue. The fact remains that Goss could not consider a library without a catalogue; the notion, I’m sure seemed absurd to him.

Theft was a problem but not in the numbers that the SPL displayed. “In the first four years at Clerkenwell lending library only 12 volumes costing £1.05 0d were stolen” (Kelly, 1977, 211). Misplacing of books could have been a problem, but library staff would have had more time on their hands under the new system to advise readers and tidy the library rather than fetching books for clients. If anything, open access made it easier for readers to find higher literary works. Open access did require more space and this was a problem for certain libraries, but the money saved from not having to produce a catalogue could have been spent on redesigning the library. The above picture from Thomas Kelly’s *A History of public libraries in Great Britain, 1845-1975* (1977) is a comical take on the debate for access. Closed access showed a blatant distrust of the general public who, for the most part, had no interest in causing havoc in the public library. The closed access debate particularly fell apart because the SPL aligned themselves so closely with Alfred Cotgreave, who created the indicator and hence had a financial stake in the system. This weakened their credibility in the press but Goss’ actions were not financially motivated. He believed he was doing the right thing for the public’s best interests.

Figure 5.

Overall, James Duff Brown and the library media created a revolutionary spirit surrounding open access and its benefits. News spread around Britain about the open
access debates in London and it was reported in the *Glasgow Herald* in July 1903. Closed access had become an out-dated system that could not fulfil the busy lives of the modern worker. With regards to Charles Goss — an honest man who was respected and liked by his own staff — his unwavering and stern defence of the indicator system cannot be defended but his work as an archivist and historian was truly superlative. Organising many superb library lectures whilst he was at the Bishopsgate — see page ten — and leading talks with the SPL on subjects such as: are our public libraries sufficiently attractive to the working class? He recognised that the success of a library lies in the essentially popular nature of its work which makes his stance against open access all the more baffling but solidifies the fact that he thought what he was doing would better serve the people of East London. The pictures below show members of the SPL and a letter written by Charles Goss to the LA. Charles Goss has been a forgotten figure, whose profound impact on the education of East Londoners in the 1890s and 1900s cannot be disputed.
Figure 6.
The Battle of the Books. An Examination of Charles Goss

Figure 7.

[The following communication, in reply to an anonymous attack in “THE LIBRARY,” December, 1895, was sent to the Editor, who refused to print it.]

Editorial Tactics

AND THE NEW

Society of Public Librarians.

To the Editor of “THE LIBRARY.”

Sir,

After many attempts I have at last managed to struggle through the long anonymous letter which you published in your last issue (December), in reference to the newly-formed Society of Librarians for London and the home counties, and but for severe editing—knowing your weakness in that direction, Mr. Editor—what must have been its original length, I wonder?

The communication is a tissue of misrepresentations, and is so ostentatiously offensive that I am not surprised that the writer, while mentioning my name, takes care to hide his own.

I have none but clean weapons, and I am not, therefore, prepared to waste time on such an opponent, who, besides having your support, has also the heroic protection of anonymity.

As the proprietor and editor of “a magazine of bibliography and library literature,” you have more than once left these attractive pastures to stab private members of the Library Association, and, to my knowledge, you have refused the right of reply or correction. As, however, you have permitted my name to be mentioned, perhaps you will, on this occasion, admit a few lines of comment.
References


