

Archibald MacLeish Librarian of Congress

When Archibald MacLeish became Librarian of Congress in 1939, the library profession objected to the appointment of an untrained librarian. Yet, within five short years MacLeish infused new life and spirit into the library. He introduced modern fiscal and administrative concepts, arranged for systematic surveys of the collections, defined goals and priorities for acquisitions and services, and initiated progressive personnel policies. But his most enduring contribution to American librarianship is his dynamic philosophy and his insistence that librarians be not mere keepers of books but active participants in the education of the people in the values of their democratic heritage and the defense of intellectual freedom.

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH will always be best known, no doubt, as a great poet and writer. But librarians will recall that just thirty years ago he was also appointed Librarian of Congress, a post he held for five years. This paper will attempt to review his half-decade of service in that position.

I. A CONTROVERSIAL APPOINTMENT

To put the story in perspective, one must go back a little in the history of the Library of Congress. From Civil War days to 1939 the library had been, except for a short interval, under the direction of two men, Ainsworth Rand Spofford and Herbert Putnam. Under Putnam's leadership (from 1899 to 1939) the library had increased its holdings from about a million to about six million volumes of books and pamphlets, not counting maps, newspapers, music,

prints, and manuscripts running into the millions. The Library of Congress classification scheme was devised, cataloging practices became standardized, the printed card service was inaugurated, the Union Catalog had its beginnings, and in 1930 Congress authorized the construction of the Annex just across the street from the original building which had been completed in 1897.¹ Thus, to use MacLeish's words, "the Library of Congress in 1939 was not so much an organization in its own right but the lengthened shadow of a man."² No wonder that the question of the succession to the office of Librarian of Congress aroused unusual interest.

Already towards the end of 1937 Herbert Putnam had indicated a desire to retire. The Executive Board of the American Library Association promptly appointed a committee to advise President Roosevelt on the nomination of a

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¹Lucy Salamanca, *Fortress of Freedom* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942), p. 195-313.

²Archibald MacLeish, "The Reorganization of the Library of Congress," reprint from *Library Quarterly*, XIV (October 1944), 2.

successor.³ Throughout 1938 and the spring of 1939 the committee sought in vain to obtain an interview with the President. As time elapsed and no nomination was forthcoming, the ALA intensified its campaign, and at the instigation of the Association's officers letters from librarians started to arrive in large numbers at the White House and Congressional offices.⁴

Meanwhile, the man who spurned this well-intentioned advice confessed to his friend, Justice Felix Frankfurter, that he had "had a bad time picking a librarian to succeed Putnam." He had, he said, "been tempted to appoint Archibald MacLeish" and wondered what Frankfurter thought. Admittedly, MacLeish was not a librarian, "nor a special student of incunabula or ancient manuscripts." Nevertheless, Roosevelt thought, "he has lots of qualifications that said specialists have not."⁵ In reply Frankfurter not only warmly endorsed MacLeish's candidacy, but he also tried, apparently successfully, to allay Roosevelt's misgivings regarding MacLeish's lack of professional training. "What is wanted in the directing head of a great library," Frankfurter wrote, is "imaginative energy and vision." He should be "a man who knows books, loves books, and makes books. If he has these three qualities, the craftsmanship of the library calling is an easily acquired quality."⁶

On June 6, 1939, President Roosevelt

made known his nomination of MacLeish to be Librarian of Congress.⁷ An immediate furore arose, both in Congress and among professional librarians. Violent anti-New Dealers saw in the appointment of this alleged pro-Communist and fellow traveler one more bit of evidence of "Communist influence on appointments emanating from the White House."⁸ Librarians were outraged at the nomination of a non-professional. The incumbent President of the ALA indignantly told the press that to appoint MacLeish as Librarian of Congress was about the same "as appointing a man Secretary of Agriculture, because he likes cut flowers on his dinner table."⁹

The general burden of the argument against MacLeish's appointment was that "there is a great deal more to being Librarian of Congress than possession of an ignorance of the Dewey Decimal system,"¹⁰ and that in appointing an "untrained and unqualified person" the President was coming "to the aid of the enemy," just as the ALA was "beginning to win its nationwide battle" for recognition of librarianship as an established profession.¹¹ "Politicians, university authorities, and other appointers" would "not be slow in taking the President's cue." More library positions were likely to be filled from outside the profession,¹² making it thereby "less attractive to ambitious and able recruits."¹³ A non-professional could not truly represent

³ "MacLeish Appointment Protested," *ALA Bulletin*, XXIII (July 1939), 467.

⁴ "Librarianship of Congress," *Proceedings of the 61st Annual Conference of the American Library Association, June 18-24, 1939*, *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIII (October 15, 1939), 55-56. "MacLeish Nomination Raises Controversy," *Publishers Weekly*, CXXXV (June 17, 1939), 2159-60.

⁵ Letter from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Justice Felix Frankfurter, May 3, 1939, reprinted in David C. Mearns, "The Brush of the Comet, Archibald MacLeish at the Library of Congress," *Atlantic Monthly*, CCXV (May 1965), 90.

⁶ Letter from Felix Frankfurter to Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 11, 1939, reprinted in Mearns, *op. cit.*

⁷ "Poet Named Librarian of Congress," *Library Journal*, LXIV (June 15, 1939), 508; "Nomination of Librarian of Congress," *Publishers Weekly*, LXXXV (June 10, 1939), 2116.

⁸ "Panned Poet," *Newsweek*, XIII (June 19, 1939), 20.

⁹ "Library, Librarian," *Time*, XXXIII (June 19, 1939), 18.

¹⁰ Viola Mauseth, "MacLeish Appointment," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XX (July 1, 1939), 9.

¹¹ Pelham Barr, "MacLeish Nomination Raises Controversy," *Publishers Weekly*, CXXXV (June 24, 1939), 2219.

¹² "Forgetting the Library of Congress," *Book Life*, I (October 1939), 3-4.

¹³ Arundell Esdale, "Librarian of Congress," *Library Association Record*, XLI (August 1939), 430.

the Library of Congress, which was "in a special sense . . . the representative and symbol of the whole body of American librarians," unless MacLeish's selection implied that "the claim that librarianship is a profession is all bunkum."¹⁴

Although the ALA claimed that in its opposition to MacLeish's appointment it spoke for 90 per cent of American librarians,¹⁵ the nomination was warmly defended by some leading librarians and non-librarians alike. The *New York Times* editorially endorsed the appointment. The Staff Association of the New York Public Library urged prompt Senatorial confirmation.¹⁶ Writing editorially in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Henry Seidel Canby dismissed the charges of MacLeish's pro-Communist sympathies as "that familiar red herring." The real issue, as he saw it, was whether the head of a great library should be a specialist "in the technique of bookgetting and bookkeeping, or should be an executive broadly trained who has demonstrated his scholarship, his ability to organize, and his capacity for representing a great storehouse of intellectual energy."¹⁷ Other supporters of MacLeish unanimously cited his successful career as lawyer, poet, writer, editor of *Fortune* magazine, and Curator of the Niemann Collection of Journalism at Harvard University. Although a poet, they said, he was not a dreamer.¹⁸ "Far from moongazing," he was "a thoroughly practical workman of marked executive ability and extraordinary energy." Efficient and sensitive, he had the ability to inspire affection and confidence in all who worked with him.¹⁹

He was a man of vision and a humanitarian.²⁰ Librarians should welcome a man of MacLeish's character and talents and not set up requirements so stringent that an able scholar and administrator could not readily join their ranks.²¹

The campaign against MacLeish's confirmation shifted into high gear when the ALA membership gathered in San Francisco for its 61st annual conference from June 18-24. The Executive Board, on June 18, sent a protest letter to President Roosevelt and members of the Senate, asserting that confirmation of MacLeish would be "a calamity," because he "lacked the essential qualifications of a librarian." Library services "would almost certainly deteriorate under amateur leadership." Two members delegated to represent the ALA at the hearing of the Senate Library Committee on June 21, 1938, soon reported back, however, that the matter seemed practically settled and that their strenuous protestations appeared to be of no avail. Indeed, the committee voted unanimously to recommend confirmation.

This was the signal for further frantic activity by the ALA leadership, but thanks to Ralph Munn, President-elect of the ALA, saner counsels prevailed in the end. Speaking at the closing session of the conference, he made it clear that he would do nothing further to oppose MacLeish's confirmation. On the contrary, he would ask the Executive Board for authority to write to MacLeish (in the event of his confirmation), explaining that opposition had not been based on personal feeling but solely on the

¹⁴ L. Stanley Jast, "Library and the Community," *ibid.*, 431.

¹⁵ "Librarianship of Congress," *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIII (October 15, 1939), 49.

¹⁶ "MacLeish Nomination Raises Controversy," *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Editorial, *Saturday Review of Literature*, XX (June 17, 1939), 8.

¹⁸ John Chamberlain, "Archibald MacLeish," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XX (June 24, 1939), 10-11.

¹⁹ "Librarianship of Congress," *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIII (October 15, 1939), 50.

²⁰ John T. Vance, "Discussion on MacLeish at the 34th Annual Meeting of American Association of Law Libraries," *Law Library Journal*, XXXII (September 1939), 338-39.

²¹ "Archibald MacLeish," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, XIV (September 1939), 57. Clarence S. Paine, "Looking Forward," *ibid.* (October 1939), 138. L. M. Raney, "The MacLeish Case," *Library Journal*, LXIV (July 1939), 522.

ground of lack of training, and that—having fought and lost—the ALA would not “sulk like spoiled children.”²² When the Senate confirmed MacLeish’s appointment on June 29 by a vote of sixty-four to eight,²³ Mr. Munn kept his word and offered the new librarian the ALA’s “complete and most friendly cooperation.” MacLeish promptly and graciously accepted the proffered olive branch.²⁴

It is perhaps idle to speculate why President Roosevelt and members of the Senate so completely ignored the spokesmen of the library profession. There is some indication that the very vehemence of its campaign created the impression that the ALA was a self-seeking pressure group, which had overplayed its hand. It was said that the ALA had recommended the appointment of its own secretary to the library position, while this same secretary was sending letters to librarians urging them to protest the appointment of MacLeish, a circumstance which Senator Barkely, head of the Library Committee, felt Senators had “a right to consider” in determining “the weight to be given to the protest.”²⁵ For the ALA leaders, on the other hand, appointment of a non-professional added insult to the injury of being consistently ignored. Had President Roosevelt taken them into his confidence, they might not have reacted as vehemently as they did to MacLeish’s nomination. The entire episode, at best, is a study in poor public relations.

II. REORGANIZATION OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The task which the new librarian assumed officially on October 1, 1939, was staggering.²⁶ The problems Herbert Putnam left for his successor to cope with were as vast, many, and varied as had been his achievements. A committee of outside library experts²⁷ conducted a thorough administrative survey and reported that the Library of Congress had “in all probability the largest and most diffuse span of control to be found in any American library.” Below the two top administrative officers, the Librarian and the Chief Assistant Librarian, were thirty-five separate administrative units, all reporting directly to the chief. “Small wonder,” the committee stated, “that the library is often described as a group of libraries within a library. It is in effect a loose federation of principalities, each with strongly developed traditions and with administrative and technical idiosyncrasies.”²⁸ No central control along functional lines existed. Eight distinct divisions, offices, or services, for example, maintained accounting records, and no less than ten divisions were engaged in the processing of books, without any central supervision over their respective activities.

²² This section of the paper is based on the following materials: U.S. Library of Congress, *Statement of the Librarian of Congress in Support of the Supplementary Appropriation for the Fiscal Year 1941* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942); U.S. Library of Congress, *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ended 1940* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941); *Ibid.*, *Annual Reports for 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944* (1942-1945); Archibald MacLeish, “The Reorganization of the Library of Congress,” reprint from *Library Quarterly*, XIV (October 1944), 1-37; Luther H. Evans, *Confidential Reports to the Librarian*, 9 vols., unpublished. As the above sources contain a great deal of overlapping information, references are given only for exact quotations.

²³ The so-called “Librarian’s Committee” appointed April 10, 1940. It consisted of Professor Carleton B. Joeckel of the University of Chicago Library School; Paul North Rice of the New York Public Library; and Dr. Andrew D. Osborn of the Harvard College Library. Cf. MacLeish, “The Reorganization of the Library of Congress, 1939-1944,” p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²² “Librarianship of Congress,” *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIII (October 15, 1939), 47-48, 49-51, 55-58, 62-63.

²³ “New Librarian of Congress,” *Library Journal*, LXIV (July 1939), 546.

²⁴ Ralph Munn and Archibald MacLeish, “Let Us All Cooperate,” *Library Journal*, LXIV (August 1939), 570.

²⁵ Quoted from *Congressional Record*, June 21, 1939; cf. Marion C. Manley, “Letter to the Editor,” *Wilson Library Bulletin*, XIV (September 1939), 74-75. Two representatives sent by the ALA to the hearing of the Senate Library Committee on June 21, 1939, took great pains to deny that the ALA’s protest was the “action of a pressure group fighting for a member of its own machine.” Cf. *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIII (October 15, 1939), 57.

This fundamental weakness in its organization was reflected in the state of the library at the time MacLeish took office. There was an arrearage of about one and one-half million unprocessed books and pamphlets, and this arrearage was growing at the rate of about thirty thousand items per year. In December of 1939, 66,000 books and pamphlets were backed up in the Cataloging Division, some 20,000 volumes were awaiting classification in the Classification Division, and twenty truckloads of law books were to be labelled and marked. The Gift Section had 20,000 unacknowledged and unprocessed books. It took an average of forty-two days from the receipt of materials until they were ready for the shelves. Recommendations for purchase of current materials, except for rush orders, waited an average of three weeks before orders were placed by the Order Division. Items selected from dealers' lists were delayed up to five months. Insistence on full cataloging treatment and classification meant low output per worker and correspondingly high processing costs. Output per assistant in the Cataloging Division for 1938-39 was only four hundred titles per year, or one and one-half per working day! The Accessions Department had an arrearage of 2,000 unpaid bills totaling about \$70,000. Binding arrears exceeded 370,000 volumes. The Card Division reported 15,000 delayed titles. There was no proper inventory of the library's holdings. An inventory taken from 1928-1934 had revealed over 170,000 missing items.

As to the quality of the collections, they were found to be strong or even outstanding in a good many areas, such as American history, library science, economics, political science, medicine, incunabula, fine arts, aeronautics, orientalia, music, Hebrew literature, and Russian materials. Nevertheless, a Committee on Acquisitions appointed in November of 1939²⁹ concluded that "the

library is not maintaining its proper position in respect to the completeness or the quality of its holdings, which are marked by important deficiencies." These deficiencies were particularly glaring in the principal European literatures, in general history other than American, in education, anthropology, and most technology. In fact, the library had no considered acquisitions program at all, but "depended rather on the activities of sellers in offering materials than on its own activity as a buyer in deciding what materials it needed and seeking them out."³⁰ Of forty important subject areas, only twelve received relatively adequate attention from library staff or consultants, thirteen were partially provided for, and with respect to fifteen there was no provision at all for initiation of orders. More than half of the purchase recommendations for 1939 were made by the Library's Card Division on the basis of recommendations of outside libraries placing orders for cards. The collections had never been systematically surveyed to ascertain gaps or needs.

Reader and reference services were scattered unsystematically among the library's numerous departments and divisions. Much time was lost, especially in the Accessions Department and the Reading Room, in answering inquiries and in rendering services which ought to have been performed by a central reference division. The legislative reference service in particular was understaffed and inadequate. While some subject divisions were serviced by scholars familiar with their fields, there were many important areas in which no member of the library staff had more than a superficial knowledge of the subject matter.

²⁹ The committee consisted of library staff, but drew on the advice of specialists from other libraries in formulating its report and recommendations. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Another major area where action was desperately called for was the staffing of the library. Lack of space before the completion of the Annex in 1939 and inadequate appropriations meant that year by year work loads had kept increasing while staff numbers had remained stationary. Accessions, for example, had increased eightfold without a corresponding increase in staff. Salaries were substandard not only in comparison to other professions, but also in comparison to those of librarians in larger colleges and universities. The staff, therefore, was either underqualified, or where qualified, grossly underpaid. MacLeish noted in his 1940 *Annual Report*, for example, that one-third of those working in the Processing Division had not completed college; less than one-fourth had a bachelor's degree in library science, and only 6 per cent had advanced degrees in library science. On the other hand, fifty-six holders of JD's, PhD's, or MA's were employed at salaries of less than \$1,980 per year!

In trying to deal with these manifold problems, he did not, MacLeish emphasized, deliberately set out to reorganize the Library of Congress. However, he soon found that dealing with one problem had effects on related problems and that "eventually it would prove simpler to change several things than to change one."³¹ If not the intent, at any rate the result of MacLeish's activity from 1939 to 1944 was a complete reorganization of the library's administrative framework, an evaluation and definition of its policies as to acquisitions and services, and constructive innovations in personnel practices. It is impossible within the scope of this paper to do more than give a very sketchy outline of the major changes brought about.

The first important step was to reduce the excessive span of administrative control to manageable proportions. The

Law Library and the Copyright Office were retained as separate entities. All other organizational units were grouped into three departments: The Processing Department, the Administrative Department, and the Reference Department.³²

The Processing Department was designed to bring together under central control all operations necessary to prepare newly acquired materials for the shelves. The Administrative Department absorbed mainly what might be termed "housekeeping" functions and fiscal matters. It adopted modern procedures and accounting methods, with control properly divided between allotting, paying, and accounting officers. Personnel matters also came under its jurisdiction.

The Reference Department, contrary to the other departments, which were formed from the outset along functional lines, was initially an agglomeration of divisions and sections that did not readily fit into the other departments. The excessive span of control from which the library as a whole had suffered was therefore in large part transferred to the Reference Department. Not until 1944 were the twenty-four administrative units which reported directly to the Director of the Reference Department reduced to fourteen, reporting through three Assistant Directors.

One important change affecting the Reference Department, which took place before its internal reorganization, was the establishment of the Acquisitions Department in 1943. Until that Department was established, the operations relating to acquisitions were divided between the Reference Department responsible for book selection and the Processing Department, which pur-

³² The Processing Department was initially under the direction of L. Quincy Mumford of the New York Public Library, which had granted him a year's leave of absence, and later under Herman H. Henkle. The Administrative Department was headed by Verner W. Clapp; and the Chief Assistant Librarian, Luther H. Evans, took charge of the Reference Department, with David C. Mearns serving as Reference Librarian responsible for book selection.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

chased and accessioned new material. To provide centralized control over all acquisitions policies and procedures, the new department took over book selection from the Reference Department and the Accession Division from the Processing Department. At the same time the Administrative Department was abolished and its functions transferred to the office of the Chief Assistant Librarian, who had until that time doubled as Director of the Reference Department. He now relinquished that directorship to the Reference Librarian. The organization as it evolved, therefore, consisted of the Chief Assistant Librarian as executive officer in charge of library-wide administrative services, while the library's three main functions of acquisitions, processing, and reference were performed through the three corresponding departments.³³

Returning to acquisitions, the matter of book selection was of constant concern to MacLeish. The report of the Committee on Acquisitions regarding the deficiencies in the library's holdings has already been noted. To devise criteria for book selection, it was necessary to define the library's basic objectives and policies. There had always been a certain ambiguity as to the library's role. Were its duties limited to serving the needs of the members of Congress, since Congress had established and directly controlled the library? Had the library any responsibility to perform services for other departments and agencies of government? Or was the Library of Congress a national library in the broadest sense designed to serve the needs of American scholarship at large? Moreover, how active should the library be in making "any part of the printed record available to society?" Was it enough to "drop a book into a reader's hand," or should the library take the initiative in making materials available that were

relevant to the controversial issues confronting the American people?³⁴

To answer these questions a series of meetings was held with the library's principal officers during the summer of 1940. "They were not," MacLeish noted, "the most successful meetings I recall," as a number of his "elder colleagues thought the Library of Congress was too big and too old . . . to ask itself what it was doing and why."³⁵ Eventually, however, "Canons of Service" were adopted which—while they failed to answer some of the more philosophical questions as to the nature and role of the library—established these basic policies and priorities as to service:

1) The Library of Congress undertakes for Members of Congress all research and reference projects required by Members of Congress in connection with the performance of their legislative duties.

2) The Library of Congress undertakes for Officers and Departments of Government research projects which can be executed by reference to its collections and which the Departments' own staff cannot perform.

3) The reference staff and facilities of the Library of Congress are available to members of the public, universities, learned societies and other libraries requiring services which the Library is equipped to give and which can be given without interference with services to Congress and other Government Departments.

The relative emphasis as regards service to Congress, the Government and the public contained in the "Canons of Service" is reflected in the "Canons of Selection" which were adopted as broad guidelines for the library's purchases. They provide:

1) The Library of Congress should possess all bibliothecal materials necessary to Congress and to the Officers of Government of the United States in the perform-

³³ Cf. *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ended 1943*, p. 15.

³⁴ MacLeish, "The Reorganization of the Library of Congress," p. 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

ance of their duties, unless other government libraries adequately cover particular fields.

2) The Library of Congress should possess all books and other materials which express and record the life and achievements of the people of the United States, with the exception of official records deposited in the National Archives and with emphasis on materials of national rather than local significance.

3) The Library of Congress should possess the material parts of the records of other societies, past and present, and should accumulate full and representative collections of the written records of those societies and peoples whose experience is of most immediate concern to the people of the United States.

Application of these "Canons" in practice presented problems. In 1940 book selection responsibilities were centralized in the Reference Department. A schedule of allotments by subject fields was prepared. The sums allotted were determined on the basis of known deficiencies in the collections, expected acquisitions from sources other than purchase, the extent of literary production in the field, and the relative importance of the subject to the library in accordance with the "Canons of Selection." With the aid of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation a number of fellowships were established. The fellows, subject specialists in their fields, as well as associate fellows from the library staff and other government organizations, undertook systematic surveys of the library's collections and made purchase recommendations. After the transfer in 1943 of book selection to the Acquisitions Department, the library continued to make use of its subject specialists in whatever department they might be working. However, for their recommendations they were made "officially answerable" to the Director of Acquisitions, even though in other respects they were answerable to other directors. As MacLeish remarked, this arrangement might

present difficulties "to those who love to reduce organization to charts and graphs, but it has the great counterbalancing advantage that it works."³⁶

This remark typifies MacLeish's dynamic approach, which in the field of personnel administration led to particularly fruitful results. As soon as he took office, MacLeish tried to obtain salary increases for the staff and was able to obtain a supplemental appropriation from Congress. A survey of library positions (the first in eighteen years) undertaken by the Civil Service Commission from 1941 to 1943 resulted in the reclassification of many positions to higher grades. But much more, MacLeish urged, had to be done to erase the discrepancy between library salaries and those obtainable for other work of professional caliber. There was no reason, he insisted, why librarians' salaries should be less than those of lawyers, economists, or other professionals, if salaries were "to be determined upon the basis of the difficulty and responsibility of the work done."³⁷

It would be wrong to assume that MacLeish, by reducing the organizational span of control in such a way that instead of some fifty persons only a handful reported to him directly, cut himself off from meaningful contact with all but the top echelon of the library's staff. Quite the contrary. His deliberate policy was the greatest possible involvement of staff at all levels in the decision-making process. "Administrative machinery," he said in commenting upon the effects of the reorganization, "is not machinery but people, and 'administrative channels' are not channels but human relationships. . . . The moment 'channels' dominate communications or administrative charts tyrannize over administrative action, the official joints con-

³⁶ *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for . . . 1944*, p. 13.

³⁷ *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for . . . 1943*, p. 74.

geal and the institution hardens." He stressed that any member of the staff who wanted to see him could do so "regardless of blueprints," and that any piece of library business which could not "accommodate itself to channels" would get done "regardless of channels."³⁸

Staff involvement, however, was not merely fortuitous. "The most effective single administrative unit in the library," according to MacLeish, was the Librarian's Conference, composed of the top eight administrators, which met daily with MacLeish and made it possible to arrive at policy decisions rapidly and "with a minimum of office memoranda."³⁹ These daily discussions not only assured a hearing for all points of view, they also kept the library's top officers informed of each other's activities. This enabled MacLeish to shift personnel from department to department as the need arose. This "administrative interchangeability," as he called it, was not only desirable in itself, MacLeish thought, but was designed to "insure the Library of Congress against the academic isolationism which has had such harmful effects in American universities, and through the universities on American education."⁴⁰

The interests of the staff as a whole were represented by the unions,⁴¹ which MacLeish did not hesitate to recognize.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15-16. As originally constituted, the Librarian's Conference consisted of Luther H. Evans, Chief Assistant Librarian; Edgar F. Rogers, Executive Assistant to Dr. Evans and Director of Personnel; David C. Mearns, Director of the Reference Department; Herman H. Henkle, Director of the Processing Department; Verner W. Clapp, Director of the Acquisitions Department; Ernest S. Griffith, Director of the Legislative Reference Service; Clement L. Bouve, Register of Copyrights; and Eldon R. James, Law Librarian, who succeeded John T. Vance upon the latter's death on April 11, 1943. Below the top level other departmental and interdepartmental committees operated to promote administrative coherence and uniformity of policies.

⁴⁰ MacLeish, "The Reorganization of the Library of Congress," p. 34.

⁴¹ Local 1 of the United Federation of Workers of America and Local 626 of the National Federation of Federal Employees.

In fact, he encouraged them "as valuable instruments of good administration."⁴² In cooperation with the library unions promotion policies and grievance procedures were evolved which went far to resolve the many conflicts and problems which are bound to arise in an institution in a state of transition and under wartime strains.

At the unions' suggestion, a Staff Advisory Committee was set up in 1942, composed of eight members, two each chosen by the unions and four by the librarian, which served as a channel for employee proposals and criticisms. Through various sub-committees the Staff Advisory Committee involved a large number of staff members in its activities.

For technical matters MacLeish drew on the library's professional personnel. The Professional Library Association, established in the spring of 1943, met once a month to consider problems of bibliographic control and adequate scholarly services.⁴³

All these measures were part of a general pattern which MacLeish called "government by discussion." Not everyone approved of it, he admitted. "Men of certain temperaments find talk annoying—particularly talk in public enterprise. Talk, they say, wastes time . . . but talk, kept within proper limits, can save time also and can gain what time alone might lose." The gain he had in mind was that of giving "an increasing number of men and women the sense of participating creatively and responsibly in a work which all of them may feel proud to share." This, if nothing else, he believed, justified the policies inaugurated during his five years as Librarian of Congress.⁴⁴

Archibald MacLeish's accomplishments

⁴² MacLeish, "The Reorganization of the Library of Congress," p. 34.

⁴³ All members of the staff grade sub-professional 5 and up were expected to attend these meetings.

⁴⁴ MacLeish, "The Reorganization of the Library of Congress," p. 34-35.

as Librarian of Congress would have been remarkable under any circumstances. They are all the more remarkable if we take into account that he operated under wartime strains and stresses. One particularly serious consequence of the war was an acute shortage of trained personnel and a staff turnover at times as high as 150 per cent per year. The library lost employees not only to the armed services but to other government agencies and private business because its salaries were not competitive, despite MacLeish's efforts to have library positions upgraded and salaries increased.

MacLeish did not wait until the United States entered the war to take measures to protect the library's collections. Already in 1940 he ordered a survey to ascertain which materials should be removed to places of safety in case of danger, and which would be required for the continuance of essential services. Suitable locations were explored and detailed plans for evacuation drawn up. The library was, therefore, in a position on December 7, 1941, to take immediate action.⁴⁵ Many hundreds of boxes of valuable materials were shipped to places of comparative security. Irreplaceable treasures, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, were stored at the United States Bullion Depository at Fort Knox. There they remained until after the Normandy invasion of 1944, when it was considered safe to return them to the Library of Congress.⁴⁷

At the same time that the most valuable materials were removed for safe-keeping twenty-four hour service for members of Congress and Government officers was initiated, and the library was called upon to perform for defense agencies an array of emergency tasks too numerous to recount here.⁴⁸ In every detail of its operation during these critical years of MacLeish's leadership the library demonstrated that "no library's resources can ever be too complete for the necessities of a great industrial state engaged in war, which involves all its facilities, all its manpower and all its knowledge."⁴⁹

III. A POET'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIBRARIANSHIP

It is impossible to evaluate MacLeish's record as librarian without saying something about the philosophy and spirit underlying all his actions. In exquisite and poetic prose he defined the role he believed librarians must play in a time when the nation's democratic heritage was threatened by aggression abroad and obscurantism at home. He disdained a narrow professionalism. Noting that no generally accepted definition of the librarian's role had yet been found, he deplored that some of those who had tried to put librarianship on a professional basis, "began not with the inward function of librarianship but with the outward furniture of professionalism—the professional schools, the professional terms, and the professional privileges." To arrive at a meaningful definition, he believed, called for a reconsideration, "which cuts beneath all this to the essentials of our work and our lives."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ During part of his term of office as Librarian of Congress he served also as head of the Office of Facts and Figures (October 1941-May 1942) and as Assistant Director of OWI (June 1942-February 1943). Cf. "Biographical Sketch," *Library Journal*, XIV (October 1944), 350.

⁴⁶ MacLeish, "The Library of Congress Protects Its Collections," *ALA Bulletin*, XXXVI (February 1942), 74-75, 144.

⁴⁷ *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for . . . 1944*, p. 27. Facilities were made available by the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, Va.; Washington and Lee University, and the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Va.; and Denison University in Granville, Ohio.

⁴⁸ MacLeish, "The Library of Congress and National Defense," *Massachusetts Library Association Bulletin*, XXXI (June 1941), 38.

⁴⁹ MacLeish, "The Library and The Nation," *Books and Libraries in Wartime*, ed. by Pierce Butler (University of Chicago Press, 1945), p.144.

⁵⁰ MacLeish, "The Librarian and the Democratic Process," *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIV (June 1940), 385-388, 421-422.

To MacLeish there was an important distinction between books as "physical objects, made of certain physical materials in a physical shape," and the "intellectual object made of all materials or of no materials and standing in as many shapes as there are forms and balances and structures in men's minds." The librarian who saw his role merely as that of keeper and dispenser of physical books, was "a sort of checkboy in the parcel room of culture." His duty was "to receive the priceless packages confided to him by the past and to re-deliver them to the future against the proper stub." It was enough for him to be "reliable, orderly, and industrious," and "to devise infallible and complicated ticket systems to find the parcels on the shelves." Beyond that, all he had to do was wait for the claimants.

If, on the other hand, the librarian was the keeper of the intellectual book, he could not be "neutral, passive, and negative." His profession "must become instead the affirmative and advocating profession of the attorney for a cause."

To MacLeish it was clear which conception librarians must choose and what the cause was which must enlist their energies. As he put it, the choice was determined by "the nature of the times." A generation or two earlier a passive role might have sufficed. But in 1939 and in the years to follow, America's democratic institutions and values were endangered by the onslaughts of fascism.⁵¹ Fascism sought to destroy Western culture; it was the enemy of all civilized values, of the life of the mind, and of the freedom of the intellect. The danger was not only fascism abroad, but fascism at home, bred by the discontent of the "intellectually and culturally dispossessed" lower middle class. The only alternative to fascism was an attempt

"to educate *all* people of this country to the value of the democratic tradition they have inherited to prevent some of the people from destroying that tradition for all." And the burden of this education, as MacLeish saw it, must fall on American libraries as the only institutions suited to the task.

He stressed over and over again that librarians could fulfill this task only by a positive approach. It was not enough, he said, for them to "secure books intelligently and to make them readily available to the inquirers." They must learn how to get readers for their books.⁵² They must "become active and not passive agents of the democratic process,"⁵³ and must use "every means at their disposal to bring to the people of this country a disinterested, informed account of the means of education at their disposition." The people, he believed, had "as much a right to know from public servants what books are pertinent to their self-government as to know from public servants what jellies they should conserve, what seed they should plant or what hen mash will produce eggs."⁵⁴

MacLeish took issue with those who viewed libraries as "cultural luxuries." The war, he contended, had amply demonstrated that libraries were "a vital necessity to a nation." He condemned those who thought "the only duty of a librarian is to thicken the indifferent walls of his library until it becomes a kind of bombproof shelter for intellectual irresponsibility in which no echo of the agony of mankind can ever penetrate."⁵⁵ He chided the scholarly community for its intellectual isolationism and warned that armed victory would

⁵¹ MacLeish, "Of the Librarian's Profession," *Books, Libraries, Librarians*, ed. by J. D. Marshall et al. (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1955), p. 264-71.

⁵² MacLeish, "Libraries in the Contemporary Crisis," *Library Journal*, LXIV (November 15, 1939), 879-82.

⁵³ MacLeish, "The Librarian and the Democratic Process," *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIV (June 1940), 387.

⁵⁴ MacLeish, "The Obligations of Libraries in a Democracy," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, XIV (April 1940), 560.

⁵⁵ MacLeish, "The Library and the Nation," p. 146.

be meaningless if the "battles of beliefs" were lost, "if the confidence of men in learning, in reason, and in truth were broken and replaced by trust in force and ignorance and superstition."⁵⁶

As the war progressed and the Nazi danger receded, MacLeish's thinking shifted increasingly from national survival and the preservation of democracy at home to the needs of the world at large. The Nazis, he said, had paid unconscious tribute to the libraries of the world, because in destroying them they had made it clear that their "anti-culture" could only exist in "a desert of ignorance and apathy" where libraries and learning had been extinguished. At the end of the war many areas of the world would be left without library facilities and one of the urgent needs of liberated peoples would be the restoration of libraries. This, however, would be difficult, if not impossible, because "a great collection of books is always and necessarily unique." No amount of effort and money could procure many of the older materials. If they existed at all, they existed only in other libraries where they were not for sale. The only practicable solution of library reconstruction in occupied Europe and Asia, MacLeish urged, was "to enable the scholars of these areas to draw upon the resources of the great libraries in other parts of the world which still possess their collections." He envisioned a system of world circulation of library materials, based on "the principle that the world's great libraries hold books in their possession as trustees, not for the people of their immediate neighborhood, nor even for the people of their particular countries, but for the entire generation of living men."⁵⁷

He did not think that large or ex-

pensive machinery was needed to establish such a worldwide system. A network of regional union catalogs with an international clearing house exercising central control could operate effectively, he believed, by drawing on the experience with interlibrary loans within national boundaries and by making the greatest possible use of modern photographic devices, air transport, etc. Eventually this might lead to a division of responsibility, on an international scale, for the acquisition of the ever growing flood of printed materials. Such a system would be of tremendous importance not only to libraries and librarians but "to the understanding of each other of peoples who must understand each other if they are going to live together in peace."⁵⁸

During the fifties, when McCarthyism was at its peak and librarians throughout the country were under pressure from self-appointed censors, MacLeish again raised his voice on behalf of intellectual freedom. Speaking at the dedication of the Carleton College library on September 22, 1956, he noted that "a surprising proportion of our people are today engaged in activities, such as the attempted suppression of books and opinions by boycott and by economic pressure of various kinds." Librarians had a clear duty to resist such pressures. Their "criterion of choice" must be "a disinterested completeness within the limits of a practical relevance." As "trustee of the printed record of his civilization," a librarian could not but "regard any exclusion from his collection of a relevant book or class of books as a falsification of the record and a breach of the trust." It was the basic assumption of all self-government that people are capable of examining the evidence for themselves and coming to their own conclusions. Any effort to withhold, suppress or censor books did violence to

⁵⁶ MacLeish, "The Attack on the Scholar's World," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XXV (July 18, 1942), 5.

⁵⁷ MacLeish, "Intellectual Needs of Liberated Peoples," *New Zealand Libraries*, VII (October 1944), 164-66.

⁵⁸ MacLeish, "The Library and the Nation," p. 152-54.

that basic democratic assumption. Every librarian "worthy of the name" belonged among the champions of the cause of free inquiry. "And as long as the fight to subvert freedom continues, libraries must be strongpoints of defense."⁵⁹

MacLeish's plea for librarians to assert their influence on behalf of liberty, reason, and the functioning of the democratic process, free from intimidation by extremists and fanatics of whatever variety, certainly has not lost its relevance in our own troubled times.

IV. CONCLUSION

Very little has been written about MacLeish's role as librarian since he left the Library of Congress towards the end of 1944 to become Assistant Secretary of State. The only account of the reorganization of the Library of Congress was written by MacLeish himself in 1944 for *Library Quarterly*. Scattered comments by his colleagues, however, indicate that they were impressed by his performance. His successor, Dr. Luther Evans, briefly reviewed the highlights of MacLeish's administration in his first *Annual Report* to Congress and concluded that "the outstanding characteristic of that brilliant episode is not the fact that so much was consummated in so short a time, but rather that there is now so little to repent."⁶⁰ Another leading librarian wrote at about the same time that it was the considered judgment of librarians

who knew MacLeish best and who had seen him in action that it is doubtful that anyone else could have accomplished as much as he did in five years.⁶¹ More recently, David C. Mearns, who had served under MacLeish as Director of the Reference Department, paid him a belated tribute. "It can be confidently, and even judicially declared," he wrote, "that his mistakes were few, whereas his attainments were many, were great and are enduring." MacLeish had "brought pace, style, taste, sagacity, and grace to his librarianship. . . . But most important," Mearns considered, "he instilled a sudden sense of contemporaneity and an awareness of a world beyond the book-stacks."⁶²

In closing one cannot do better than to quote from the statement transmitted to MacLeish by the staff of the Library of Congress on the occasion of his leave-taking.⁶³ In their farewell his colleagues expressed

. . . their warm and enduring affection for a friend; . . . their admiration for an inspiring administrator; their continuing loyalty to the sustained and penetrating vision which has given new meaning to librarianship, to the high purpose, to the relentless drive towards accomplishment, and to the integral humanism of his insistence upon the participation of libraries in the processes of democracy and civilization and in the liberation of the human spirit. . . . ■■

⁵⁹ MacLeish, "A Tower Which Will Not Yield," *ALA Bulletin*, L (November 1956), 649-54.

⁶⁰ *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for . . . 1945*, p. 13.

⁶¹ Keyes D. Metcalf, "Editorial Forum," *Library Journal*, LXX (March 1, 1945), 213.

⁶² Mearns, *op. cit.*, p. 90-92.

⁶³ *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for . . . 1945*, p. 11-12.

