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Early libraries in Nelson

LISHI KWASITSU

Nelson was founded in November 1841 as the second of the New Zealand Company's planned settlements and was administered with its province by the Nelson Provincial Council from 1853 to 1876. Between 1853 and 1867, £25,249.5s. worth of books were imported into Nelson, a considerable amount when compared with £35,423.18s.5d. worth of similar imports into the much larger settlement at Wellington for the same period.¹ Many of these books found their way into various types of libraries which were established in the colony partly as trappings of modern civilisation on a pattern not unlike that described by Paul Kaufman.² Among these libraries were booksellers' libraries and libraries of literary societies and mechanics' institutes. The former libraries were profit orientated while the latter were vehicles of education and personal training.

Circulating libraries

The printing press of Charles Elliott (1811-1876), Nelson's first printer, formed part of the impedimenta of the pioneering settlers. Elliott who had a 'snug business' as a printer in London³ was also in Nelson, a bookseller, auctioneer and butcher.⁴ In July 1842 he became the proprietor of Nelson's first circulating library (Figure 1).

Elliott's clientele comprised the early settlers and their families — labourers, farmers, shopkeepers and middle-class gentlemen of considerable culture and education who had come to implant a vertical slice of British society in Nelson. Though Elliott claimed that his library was established at public instance, it is not known if it provided a successful adjunct to his thriving book business. The annual subscription of £3.3s. was probably higher than most settlers could afford. Considering his own editorial comment that the Nelson Institute (see below) was by January 1859

the only place in Nelson where a library existed for reference, and where the newspapers from abroad, from other colonies, and from our own settlements, were to be found, and were preserved and taken care of⁵

and also the fact that no further reference to his library has been found, one may speculate that it had a short life.

Alexander Aitken opened his subscription library in May 1853 (Figure 2). Though his subscription rates were much lower than Elliott's and he expanded his business by moving into more commodious and central premises on Bridge Street, and by constantly

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CIRCULATING LIBRARY.—In compliance with a very general request, C. ELLIOTT informs the Inhabitants of Nelson that his select assortment of Books are now let out to read on the following terms:—

Single volumes, in which a novel or other work is complete	£0	0	6
Other volumes	0	0	4
Quarter's subscription	1	1	0
Annual subscription	3	3	0

C. E. begs to say that, should he receive sufficient encouragement, he will make immediate arrangements to enlarge his Library both from Sydney and London.

A catalogue may be seen at the *Examiner* office.

Figure 1. *Nelson Examiner*, 23 July 1842

replenishing his stock, Aitken soon realised that there was little or no profit in his library and that to make a living he had to devote time to his skills as an auctioneer and commission agent. By 2 February 1856, he announced that he would disperse his stock of more than 1,000 volumes (Figure 3).

The failure of Aitken's commercial library did not dissuade others from venturing into the same field. On 16 March 1858, W. Collie opened the Select Circulating Library and offered for sale 'the latest parts of the illustrated, and other English newspapers and periodicals; also books and stationery'. His service conditions, which included door-to-door delivery, were a slight improvement on the services of his predecessors (Figure 4).

Collie obviously did not find his library a profitable venture. Though he advertised on 3 August 1859 that he was extending his services to the 'residents in the Wairau, Awatere, &c.', he also reduced his fees to 2s.6d. per month or 5s. per quarter and offered subscribers at a distance from the Beaver four books at a time: an inducement which does not seem to have yielded additional subscriptions (Figure 5). Whether Collie had started a branch library or moved his business to Blenheim, I do not know.

Mention should also be made of J. Hounsell who operated a circulating library on Collingwood Street where he distributed catalogues gratis and loaned books by the volume.

Nelson Institute

By 1873 there were eleven public libraries, mechanics' institutes and other literary and scientific institutions in the Nelson province with 12,077 books, figures which should be compared with five similar libraries and other institutions in Wellington with 5,977 books.⁶ The library of the Nelson Literary and Scientific Institute was the largest of these libraries in Nelson. It was planned with the Institute on the high seas aboard the *Whitby* before the immigrants arrived in Nelson.⁷ A reading room of 30' x 16' was erected in 1842 and a

much bigger building was opened on 22 March 1861. Before then, on 22 November 1858, the Institute changed its name to the Nelson Institute to embrace a museum, library and classrooms with the aim of disseminating 'useful information in Literature, Science, and the Arts'. Subscription for membership was initially £1.1s., lowered to 10s. to broaden its membership base, but raised to £1 when that did not lead to any substantial increase in subscriptions, and subsequently increased to £1.10s. Membership was open to persons above the age of fifteen who had to be proposed by two members at least two months previously and admitted by a ballot by a majority of members present at a general congress. These were standard enough requirements for a 'learned society'. They were also conditions which for a pioneering settlement served unwittingly as restrictions that put the Institute's facilities beyond the reach of the majority of labourers and make its success in promoting book culture among the settlers difficult to quantify. Not surprisingly, the Institute had only 50 members in 1845. Membership, however, increased to 117 by December 1856, 189 in July 1859, 220 at the end of that year, and 237 in December 1861. High subscriptions may have restricted membership but in his report of 20 January 1858, the secretary attributed the low number of subscriptions to the 'superior attractive power of gold over literature'. The Institute clearly did not have sufficient funds to promote its activities in spite of monetary grants and loans from the New Zealand Company, the Nelson Provincial Council, and the Nelson Trust Fund. Initially insolvent, it showed a credit balance for the first time in February 1868.

Up until the appointment on 9 December 1848 of W. M. Stanton as its first librarian, the library and Institute were administered by a committee, apparently on a part-time basis. Reviewing the Institute's history in a sub-leader on 25 May 1850, the *Nelson Examiner* saw Stanton's appointment as desirable but criticised the management of the Institute's affairs, especially the high cost of its building and the librarian's salary:

the chief part of the funds were swallowed up in an expensive building, into which the few books we possessed were placed, and no charge taken of them, until the abstraction and loss of many vo-

lumes induced the appointment of a librarian, with a salary which it took half the subscriptions of the members to pay.⁸

I have been unable to trace Stanton's salary as a librarian but T. P. Calwell who had replaced Stanton by 7 June 1851 apparently could not live on his salary and had to carry on his business as bookseller, stationer and commission agent in the Institute's premises. By August 1855 another librarian, probably H. J. Goodman who resigned in April 1865, was appointed on £60 a year and opened the reading room from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and from 7 to 9 p.m.

The quality of the library's stock varied greatly. Though there was a preference for well bound books, second-hand copies were also acquired. The collection comprised donations of used books from friends of the colony in London, and books purchased mainly from London in 1847 through D. Sclanders of the Nelson firm of Morrison and Sclanders and by committee members, as was the purchase in London of 50 books by Fletcher in February 1868. Some of these acquisitions were sent from London direct by post. Edward Wakefield (which one is not clear) donated a few books and Charles Elliott the second volume of Dieffenbach's *New Zealand*. Other donations included 31 books on theology, history, biography, science and travel by the Bishop of Nelson in August 1861; 50 very valuable scientific books in German by the Austrian government in March 1864; six volumes of 'native-printed ferns and seaweeds' by H. Wrigg; and seven volumes of Audubon's *Birds of America* by Huddleston. On 18 November 1848, the library boasted in a news item in the *Nelson Examiner* that it entered the following periodicals on standing order:

Edinburgh and Westminster Reviews, Blackwood, Tait, Dublin University, Douglas Jarrold's Magazines, Punch, Athenaeum and the Times, Examiner and Atlas newspapers.

A I T K E N' S
CIRCULATING LIBRARY,
 BRIDGE STREET,
 NELSON.

In announcing the opening of this Library, Alexander Aitken trusts that it will meet the wishes, merit the approbation, and be the means of both pleasure and profit to the public of Nelson and surrounding districts. It contains several hundred volumes of really useful, as well as

POPULAR WORKS,

Embracing History, Science, Literature, Standard Novels, &c. Every work of merit added to the Library so soon as it can be procured.

TERMS.

Subscriptions, payable in advance in every instance,

Per Year 10s.
 Per Half-year 5s.
 Per Quarter 2s. 6d.

Several cases of new Books, per Royal Albert, &c., just received, embracing amongst others—

- Uncle Tom's Cabin
- A Woman's Journey round the World
- Boswell's Life of Dr. Johnson
- The New Testament, illustrated
- The Orbs of Heaven
- Soyer's Modern Housewife
- Domestic Cookery
- National Library
- Popular Library
- Railway Library
- The Field Book, or Sports and Pastimes of the British Islands
- &c. &c. &c.

Figure 2. *Nelson Examiner*, 28 May 1853

ALBERT HOUSE.
LARGE AND IMPORTANT SALE OF
STOCK-IN-TRADE.

MR. ALEXANDER AITKEN begs to announce that, having let the Retail Store now occupied by him in Bridge-street, in consequence of his having decided to devote the whole of his attention to the Auctioneering and Commission Business, he will proceed to SELL by AUCTION, on MONDAY, the 11th day of February next, and following days, all his very valuable and recently-selected STOCK, consisting of—

- Drapery
- Haberdashery
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- Wines and Spirits
- Oilmen's Stores
- Toys
- &c., &c., &c.

Also

his well-known LIBRARY of BOOKS, of every description, containing upwards of 1,000 volumes.

Catalogues will be ready a few days before the sale.

Terms liberal, at sale, to commence each day at 11 o'clock, sharp.

Lunch provided.

A. A., in making the above announcement, desires at the same time to return his sincere thanks to all who may have favoured him with their custom during the time he has been in business in Nelson; and also to say, that until the catalogues are prepared he will be happy to dispose of any of his stock, either by wholesale or retail, at unprecedented low prices. Country storekeepers and families would do well, therefore, to favour him with a visit, as nearly the whole of his goods are new, and in first-rate order.

Albert House, Bridge-street,
 January 29.

Figure 3. *Nelson Examiner*, 2 February 1856

Journals devoted to mechanical engineering were also acquired. But the secretary's report of 20 January 1858 lamented the irregularity in supply of English periodicals, some of which were 'six to nine months old before they are received.' There were 600 volumes in 1845; 2,462 in February 1868; 2,567 in March 1869 from which 3,008 issues were made in that year. Stock rose to about 2,600 in February 1871 yielding 10,822 issues. By the time in 1872 when Luke Nattrass, the librarian, compiled a catalogue of his holdings, the collection had fallen to 2,437 volumes. Many titles were lost through the failure of delinquent borrowers to return loaned items but many books and periodicals were too dilapidated to remain in circulation and were sold by auction while others were distributed to hospitals, gaols and the Nelson Lunatic Asylum.

District libraries

Although it does not seem as if the New Zealand Company included the establishment of libraries in its original proposal for the organisation of the Nelson settlement as it did in the case of Wellington, New Plymouth and Canterbury,⁹ it responded to the application of its resident agent in 1850 to contribute £50 and

New Advertisements.

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W. COLLIE has just received the bulk of his LIBRARY, consisting of many of the most interesting Works published; and it is W. C.'s intention to keep continually adding fresh Works of the most readable character.

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Quarter	8s.
Half-year	15s.

Library books delivered at private residences, once or twice a week, at 10s. per quarter. 1099

Figure 4. *Nelson Examiner*, 12 June 1858

other grants to the development of libraries in the Nelson Province. On 8 February 1855 the Nelson Provincial Council allocated £150 for distribution to public libraries.¹⁰ Earlier, on 30 November 1854, a select committee was set up to examine proposals for establishing a library for the Council. This library was subsequently established in a section of the Nelson Institute as the Council had no suitable accommodation of its own for the purpose. Various sums of money were placed on the estimates from time to time by the Council for libraries. By 1857 there were libraries at Hope, Motueka, Richmond and Riwaka, Spring Grove, and 'Suburban North'.¹¹ By 1860 there were similar facilities in Wakefield, Upper and Lower Moutere, Collingwood, Waimea West, and 'Suburban South'.¹² In an attempt to regulate the establishment of public libraries, the Nelson Provincial Council passed a resolution on 3 May 1860 to pay £20 to newly formed libraries.¹³ The conditions laid down for this and other grants by the Wells Select Committee appointed by the Council stated:

1. That all Libraries eligible to receive aid from Provincial funds shall have a committee of management, consisting of not less than five members, including a Secretary and Treasurer.
2. That the sum voted for Country Libraries be distributed in proportion to the amount of the annual subscriptions actually paid by the members.
3. That each Library be placed in the most suitable and convenient location for the use of the members.
4. That an annual return, properly audited, be made to the Superintendent on or before the 31st day of January in each year, stating number of members, subscription fee, amount of subscriptions received, and also number of volumes added during the year.
5. That all Libraries, minutes of their committees, and Treasurers' accounts, should at all times be open to the inspection of any person appointed by the Superintendent for that purpose.
6. That compliance with the terms laid down in the

report be made a condition of Government aid on the part of any library.¹⁴

Libraries established in 'houses appropriated to the sale of intoxicating liquors' were to be denied subvention. On 26 May 1869, the Council by resolution urged the Nelson Waste Lands Board to reserve land for endowment to public libraries.¹⁵

The Richmond Mechanics' Institute and Library was established on 12 November 1846 at a meeting held in the Wesleyan Chapel at Richmond for the 'purpose of mutual instruction and general cultivation of literature and science' and to spread useful information to all and sundry. However, political and religious discussions were banned. Membership was open to persons above the age of twelve years and the subscription to be paid in advance was 4d. per month with an entrance fee of 6d. for ordinary members under 21 years but 4d. per month and 1s. entrance fee for ordinary members above that age. The subscription for honorary members was 10s. a year, and a donation of £3 or its equivalent in the form of books and/or periodicals conferred on the donor privileges of life membership. Membership lapsed if a subscription was one month in arrears and readmission was effected only on the payment of all arrears to the date of readmission. With a nucleus collection of only 80 volumes donated by three foundation members, the collection rose to over 100 volumes the week following, to more than 300 in May 1856, about 400 in September 1856 and 1,180 volumes in February 1873: some of these were volumes of *Chambers's Journal* and some of the works of Charles Dickens. As the library did not initially possess any premises of its own, the books were stored in the Wesleyan Chapel with the kind permission of Rev. J. Aldred. By 1851 the library was moved to the residence of Neame the librarian and opened once a week on Wednesday evenings. Wallis who replaced Neame in 1852 also took the library to his house. Eventually on 20 July 1858, the Institute opened a reading room of 15' x 26' erected at a cost of £173.10s.: £75 having been raised by voluntary contribution and the rest deriving from a grant from the Nelson Provincial Council and a contribution from the Richmond

Odd Fellows who were allowed to utilise it for meetings. The stated purpose of the building was as a meeting room for

the Road and Education Boards of the district, the Court of Petty Sessions, and Odd Fellows' Lodge, also as a place of worship on Sundays, a lecture room, a reading and classroom, and as the home of the circulating library.

In June 1860, the library's facilities were extended gratuitously to persons from Taranaki then resident in Richmond.

A similar facility was established in Waimea South on 1 November 1853. There were 40 subscribers in 1855 and 75 books donated by some of them. The collection rose to 304 in 1856. Its new premises, opened on 17 July 1856, cost £154.2s.1½d. to erect on part of a two acre plot of land donated by Baigent.

Like most libraries of this period, the Hope Agricultural Circulating Library started in 1854 in rented premises with a total of 25 volumes in its first year 'not adapted to the purposes of a circulating library'. In April 1855 there were 161 volumes, including twelve volumes donated by Turner of Pitfure. By 16 April the following year there were 222 books, including 26 volumes of Lardner's *Cyclopædia* and Alison's *History of Europe*. The collection increased to 772 volumes in May 1861 and was described by J. D. Greenwood as the 'best out of Nelson'. The library was concerned with the provision of the right sort of reading materials to its clientele. An 1859 annual report suggests a disagreement between some subscribers addicted to light reading which found no favour elsewhere and other members who wanted facts instead of fiction. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to suggest how the library dealt with this perennial problem.

On 7 May 1856, building contractors were advised by advertisement to inspect floor plans and specifications for a proposed library from Richard Sutcliffe. Tenders were to be sealed and addressed to the 'Building Committee of the Motueka Library and Reading Room.' Nearly two years later on 20 January 1858, the centrally located building was opened with 'a highly creditable musical entertainment given by the members of the Nelson Amateur Musical Society'. No more information has been discovered on the early history of this library but it appears its fortunes were similar to those of its predecessors: low subscriptions and dilapidated stock.

At a public congress at Spring Grove on 2 August 1856 a steering committee made up of Messrs J. Ladly, E. Rennell, G. Wratt, C. and W. White, and G. Eves was constituted to work out details to establish a library

and reading room at Spring Grove. This library had no building of its own by August 1857 but there were 48 subscribers paying initially £1.1s., subsequently reduced to 10s. per year, and the 'number of books, though comparatively small, has been selected with good taste and judgement'.

Following the pattern set in the other districts, William Soper convened a public meeting to establish a library at Wairau. The scanty evidence available suggests that on 1 May 1858 a committee of twelve (under the chairmanship of W. H. Eyes and comprising, among others, Rev. H. F. Butt and Rev. T. D. Nicholson) was formed to draw up regulations and to collect subscriptions for the formation of a library in the Wairau district.

The Stoke Library was established in April 1858 with the object of diffusing 'sound and useful knowledge'. By 31 December 1859 it had a total grant of £45.9s.8d., comprising £37.16s.8d. in two grants from the Nelson Provincial Council and £7.13s. from donations and subscriptions. It had a small clientele of eighteen people among whom were circulated 60 books in 1859. The library had 250 volumes in 1860 under E. Austin, its librarian, and by February 1873 a building was erected at the cost of about £193.10s. to serve as a public hall and reading room.

On 17 July 1858, the residents of Wairau West decided to erect a reading room on a piece of land to be sold at a concessionary rate by Newth but nothing more is known about it.

The only early evidence I have been able to trace on the Wakefield Literary Institute indicates that £226.11s.10d., made up of individual contributions and a grant from the Nelson Provincial Council, was invested in its establishment, and its library contained 600 volumes in January 1860.

The Young Men's Christian Association and Literary Institute which started in 1860 in a store provided by Messrs Nash and Scaife opened a reading room and library every evening from 6.30 to 9 p.m. This library's collection of more than 400 volumes comprising partly religious and scientific literature was mainly donated by F. Tuckett who had lived in Nelson but was then at 4 Mortimer Street, London. Other items included:

Sunday at Home, Leisure Hour, Christian Treasury, The Quiver, Meliora, Journal of Sacred Literature, Bond of Brotherhood, Bible Class Magazine, Evangelical Christendom, Chambers' Journal, The Builder, Mechanics' Magazine, Punch, Illustrated News, Illustrated Times, Penny Illustrated Paper, The Dial,

CIRCULATING LIBRARY, BEAVER.

W • COLLIE is making ADDITIONS to the LIBRARY, and has REDUCED the TERMS to 2s. 6d. per month, or 5s. per quarter, payable in advance.

Subscribers at a distance from the Beaver allowed four books at a time. 3435

Figure 5. *Nelson Examiner*, 3 August 1859

and *The Methodist Recorder*, (two London papers) and the *Colonist*.

It is not clear from the slight evidence I have discovered how well this library functioned but in 1863 it incurred a liability of £55.

The Appleby Library was probably established before 12 May 1860; its regulations adopted by subscribers on that date were repealed on 16 September 1869. Its credit balance then was £5.3s.8d. It should also be noted that a reading room provided at a cost of £100 was opened at Collingwood on 14 April 1871.

Summary

On the whole, early libraries in the Nelson settlement demonstrate a pattern not unlike that which one finds during eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain. Before the passing of the Public Library Act in 1850 and to some extent afterwards, demand for reading matter, served and fostered by the availability of cheap editions in the 1840s, led to many attempts to set up libraries as self-help or philanthropic or commercial institutions. The early settlers coming from Britain would naturally expect the same sort of libraries to be set up as their society developed. The reasons for failure were very much like those found for circulating libraries in Jamaica.¹⁶ Scarcity of money in the pioneering society necessitated long periods of credit which piled into huge arrears to ruin many business enterprises. In addition, too much time was required to retrieve overdue books from subscribers and there were too few books to go round. In some cases the number of subscribers was too small to make the investment worthwhile and the capital

outlay did not always yield commensurate profit. Though the provision of commercial library services seemed attractive in the Nelson settlement in the same way that it did elsewhere in Britain and British settlements overseas, for the energetic ambitious man it soon became apparent that there were better opportunities in other fields of activity in the pioneering settlement. The opportunities for reading were there in a limited form in the larger centres but the potential readership in some of these areas was not large. Many libraries today have a large clientele but the problems of running small libraries on skeleton staff in inadequate accommodation with inadequate funds still persist. This survey of early libraries in Nelson gives us some indication of the sort of things the early settlers could read. How much they read and what benefits they derived from reading remain to be investigated.

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