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# WHAT THE LIBRARY CAN DO FOR OUR FOREIGN-BORN

BY JOHN FOSTER CARR

A TALK BEFORE THE MASSACHUSETTS LIBRARY CLUB,  
AT WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS., MAY 23RD, 1913

*Reprinted in part from the Massachusetts Library Club Bulletin.*

"Fresh among my boyhood's memories—I am talking of the early eighties—there are pictures of two librarians, one a grave but genial scholar of remarkable erudition, the head of a great library; the other a young lady whose duties in a town library made no serious inroads upon her favorite work of knitting. I do not pretend to say how far these two were, for their primitive time, prevailing types of librarians, but types, I believe, they were. To compass "all learning" was long the ideal of the library, that the scholar-librarian followed. Now, as it seems to me, with your new scientific organization, "all life" has become the library's province and every library is busy doing new planning and new work for its conquest, developing greater educative force, greater attractive social power. And for the librarian's despair, with the coming of this new purpose, our life grows more and more complex, as it rapidly develops a new civilization.

'The new duties, for instance, that migration is putting upon the libraries tly complicate the question of the library's development. It is a national problem that it is largely for you to meet, unquestionably the greatest educational problem yet attempted in this country. How shall I state its size and significance to you?

"Define first the problem from the point of numbers: It will be the marvel of the future that we have sometimes received a million immigrants a year, and yet that for so many years we have done nothing for their systematic Americanization and education. The Director of the Census made the announcement last October that there were among us 3,612,700 foreign born white males of voting age, who are not naturalized—a fact that carries a consequence of probably 7,000,000 men, women and children more or less out of touch with American ideals and American ideas. In your own Massachusetts where

your 1,059,245 foreign-born amount to very nearly one-third of your total population, 264,475, or 58 per cent. of your foreign-born white males of voting age are not naturalized. Of this million again, 141,541 are illiterates, 10 years of age and over. These large figures bring home to you a problem that is national.

After describing the character and quality of these immigrant peoples, their need of an American education, and our opportunity and duty of helping them, Mr. Carr continued: "The school, the great assimilator of our foreign children, has, it must frankly be admitted, accomplished little for the adult foreign-born. It has found it difficult to refashion its educational method to the immediate necessity of the case. Neither books, nor seats, nor system have been well adapted to the instruction of the immigrant. Altogether the handicap has been too serious a one to be surmounted by any but the most intelligent, persistent, and ambitious of these new comers.

"The library has a far greater opportunity in this work than the school. And for the Americanization of the adult foreign-born, in its own way, it can render the same service that the school does for the foreign-born child. Its aid is more inviting and less formal. It makes less strenuous demand upon the attention of a man who is often exceedingly tired after a long day's work. It welcomes the man who thinks himself too old for school. It is open throughout the year where the night school at most is only open seven months of the year. It can furnish papers and books in his own language and thus provide a homely air. It gives him a sense of joint right and ownership with us in the best things of our country, and that without a suggestion of patronizing interest. Best of all, I think, it can put the immigrant in effective touch with American democracy, American ideals, and so better than any

other agency destroy the impression of merciless commercialism that so many of our immigrants in their colonies continually assert is the main characteristic of our civilization.

"In Mount Vernon we made a first experiment, trying to work out a practical plan that would be useful in this new field of education: The education and Americanization of our immigrants. We mean to give them, first of all, a cordial welcome to the new land, to bring them in touch with the best and most helpful things in American life; and then to give them such education—civic and other—as they know they need, and so often desire, and to help prepare them for citizenship. As a first step, with the active help of their leading men in Mount Vernon, we have been giving a series of very simple lectures to the foreign-born in their own languages. These lectures have been based on our "Guide to the United States for the Immigrant" and have been in Italian, Yiddish, Swedish and English. They have been given in the public school, and all necessary expenses have been paid by the Board of Education.

"After a few of these lectures, we took up the second and more important part of our plan—the use of the library in the work. The difficulties are often that foreign-born working men and women either do not know of the existence of the library, or they fear that they will be unwelcome visitors. Once persuaded to enter they need immediate personal attention. Index cards are impossible to them; the open shelf is generally almost useless; they know little or nothing of the proper use of books. In short, they require much painstaking individual help from the librarian.

"And this is what we have done: In March one of these school meetings for Italians was adjourned at 9 o'clock and became a personally conducted tour to the Public Library. The Verdi Club welcomed us there with "Santa Lucia," "Bella Napoli," and selections from Verdi and Mascagni on mandolin and guitar. There was a first simple talk on libraries and their privileges. Our guests learned that the library, like the school, is the property of the public, and that full privilege of it belongs to every man and woman and reading child living in Mount Vernon. The different rooms of the library were explained; the few simple rules stated. The

public promise was made: 'The more you use the library, the more Italian books, papers and magazines we shall buy.' The librarian made a special point of meeting personally as many as possible of the people, giving a social and friendly air to the place. Afterwards it was a pleasure to see them crowd around the desk asking for cards, when it was discovered that these could be had—and books with them, too—immediately, by any one who would give a name in the Mount Vernon directory of someone who could vouch for the applicant's honesty and good character. The evening closed with more music.

"Not too much was attempted that first night. For the second library meeting the lecture was given in the auditorium of the library itself. The public invitation given was made general. Parents were particularly requested to bring their children, who, it was announced, would be entertained in the children's room by the assistant in charge of the children's department. This meeting was largely devoted to a lecture in Italian, and there was more pleasant and informal talk about the library itself and its privileges. The Verdi Club as always, eagerly volunteered its services for entertainment. Selections, vocal as well as instrumental, were very successfully given; and an accomplished young actress recited Pascarella's grotesquely humorous 'Discovery of America' to the enthusiastic plaudits of the crowd.

"Fulfilling our promise, a new list of Italian books has been purchased. This includes a few Italian classics not in the library, and a certain number of English, French and Russian novels in Italian translation—all world classics. A particular point was made of adding books that are either translations of famous American works, or books about the United States and American life. A second list already approved and next to be ordered is of similar character, including, besides a liberal supply of fiction, books of travel, with a further sprinkling of American authors. There has also been conditionally promised by a friend of the library a set of books already selected, devoted chiefly to works describing the new Italy and its aspirations, simple books of biography, science, mechanics, hygiene, with further additions of Italian classics.

"The individual attention of the librarian is proving the largest factor in the

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Library School

success of the work. She explains the mysteries of procedure from open shelf and selection of books to their registration and care. Beginning with the Immigrant's Guide, which she calls "the foundation on which the librarian must build" in this work, she helpfully learns what are the new member's needs and tastes. Here the Guide is of special service and becomes a useful interpreter between them, for it is accessible in English to the librarian, and can be read in his own Italian or Polish or Yiddish by the newcomer. By gentle hint and open advice, through other books in his own language, he is given the chance of learning something of American life, its ideals and opportunities. He learns of books that will serve not only for his amusement and pleasure, but for the best education of which he is capable, and so help him to earn more money and more fully enjoy life.

"One question that has been taken up has been the abuse of books. It was found that many Italian working men who had had few advantages of education in their own country occasionally brought their books back either badly soiled, or torn. To provide a remedy for this in a friend, but effective way, making a direct appeal to the reader, the following notice in Italian, with its familiar appealing "thou's," was prepared and is now being pasted on the covers of all Italian books in the library: "Friend Reader!

This book is full of wise advice and useful information for thee. Treat it well, as thou wouldst a good friend. Do not rumple it. *Do not soil it.* Do not tear it. Think that after having been useful to thee, it must be of service to a great number of thy compatriots. To damage it, to tear it, *to soil it*, would give a bad impression of thee and prevent other Italians getting benefit from this book. Respect this volume for the good name and for the advantage of Italians.

"This book must be returned to the Public Library of Mount Vernon, New York, within two weeks."

"And for those who abuse books, the plan has been formed of showing, when necessary, a copy of the Immigrant's Guide that had only been borrowed once, and then returned to the library in so bad a condition that it cannot again be sent out, comparing with this a copy of Dante that was printed in Venice in 1529, whose

pages are as clean, and in many cases almost as white, as when it left the press, nearly 400 years ago.

"In such meetings as these it is intended for the future to have always some spoken English. At one of them, there was an Italian speech by an American. We are trying to cultivate intimate and friendly relations with our foreign-born friends, and to do this on so simple and democratic a basis, that there can be no suspicion of a patronizing interest on our part. It is noteworthy that the success of these Italian meetings in Mount Vernon has been made possible by the very hearty co-operation of two Italians locally prominent, both contractors—the most important contractors of the town—and of the Italian Catholic Priest.

"The first book needed for starting this new educational work, and the first prepared was a Guide—a guide, if you please, to American life, a kind of immigrant's Baedeker, telling the man those things that he knows he needs to know about our country: How to find work; How to travel in this strange land, where everything, they say, seems to be upside down; How to learn English; The claims of Agriculture—the story of the success of the 80,000 Italians, of the 30,000 Jews on farms in this country, of our 70,000 Polish farmers; The geography, climate, government of the United States; How immigrants can become citizens; The laws they are liable to break innocently, and other laws important to them; Health; Chapters on Savings Banks, on notaries and other abuses, and private advice. The Guide was prepared throughout with immigrant co-operation, with the help of those who know the life and language of the immigrant. It has now been published in four languages, especially adapting each book in every detail to these different nationalities. Demands are now being made for similar books written in the same manner and style—for a United States history, for simple biographies, a simple book of civics, a simple book on learning English.

"We shall soon need to go to press with new editions of the Polish and Yiddish books. Three English editions have been printed and we are now issuing a third Italian edition. Hundreds of calls have come for the book in twenty-two other languages. In the work we have had the earnest co-operation of men of different

religions—Catholic and Jew as heartily helpful as Protestant. The press has given us constant helpful publicity, calling the little book, with many variations of phrase, a *Guide to the Immigrant*—a means, through understanding sympathy, of destroying the things that separate, working for broader democracy, a more generous human fellowship.

“Night schools and educational institutions of many kinds have started successful work with the *Guide*. The lectures as given in Mount Vernon have proved so attractive and useful that they have drawn large audiences of immigrant workers in New York, in Boston—under the auspices of the Lowell Institute—and in many other places.

“And the library has proved a powerful ally. In spite of a rule against books in foreign languages, the *Guide* was immediately included in the A. L. A. Book-list. And a number of libraries, scattered widely over the country, began a new work. A few, for the first time, printed their rules in a foreign language. Some systematically started the adults’ interest through the children. Others made an appeal directly to these foreign-born working folk. One broke all precedent and placed the *Guide* on sale at the desk.

“To help the propaganda the Italian National Society, the Dante Alighieri,

promised the presentation of ten libraries of selected Italian books to public libraries in towns where this educational work for Italian immigrants had been undertaken. These gifts led to enterprising efforts by several libraries; some even listing the Italian families of the town, and sending them postal card notices of the new Italian department. In one place the Italian residents and working men held two public meetings to collect money to increase still further the library’s supply of Italian books.

“And the work grew. Other libraries tried the experiment. ‘Repeat orders’ began to come, with the first one the news that the single copy of the *Guide* had proved so popular that it was ‘worn out completely.’ It was replaced with a dozen copies, and soon we were told that by hard use the new books were ‘also wearing out.’ The Massachusetts Free Public Library Commission bought the book in quantity, ordered them specially bound, and arranged for their efficient distribution to the libraries of the state.

“In this work clearly lies an opportunity to give the library greater educational and social power, by opening it to whole classes of people who know nothing of libraries, little of books. For this service we need the heart interest of all who believe in what we are doing.”

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## Immigrant Education Society

### *PURPOSES:*

To give our immigrants a cordial welcome to the new land.

To give them practical information that will save them from their exploiters.

To give them practical and accurate information about the opportunities of American life—particularly of American agricultural life.

To help them to such useful education—civic and other—as they know they need and so often desire.

With all respect for their love for their Motherland, to prepare those who wish to remain among us for intelligent and patriotic American citizenship.

IN SHORT, FOR OUR COMMON WELFARE, as friends, to open to our immigrants the doors of American life and citizenship.

### IMMIGRANT EDUCATION SOCIETY

241 Fifth Avenue, New York.









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