
Evolution of the British Columbia Legislative Library

by Joan A. Barton

The British Columbia Legislative Library has, since its inception, fostered and supported library development throughout the Province. Its policies and activities, however, remain little understood by its membership and by casual users alike. In fact, the Library itself, in day-to-day activities may at first glance appear uncertain of its own mandate and priorities.

The legislated mandate is clear: to provide reference and research services for the Members of the Legislative Assembly, their research staffs, the Executive Council and the Officers of the House. On the other hand many of its present activities remain rooted in history and tradition and appear to bear no relationship to the straightforward mandate.

The Library was founded in 1863 by a grant of two hundred and fifty pounds to serve the Colonial Legislature of Vancouver Island and subsequently the Legislators of the Province of British Columbia, when the united colony of Vancouver Island and the mainland colony of British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871.

The first professional Librarian, R.E. Gosnell, a close friend of Premier Sir Richard McBride, declared that he intended to create a library which would "anticipate not only the requirements of the Legislative Assembly but of the Province at large." He set out to create, in effect, a Provincial Library and as such the name was used interchangeably for the institution that was by statute, still the Legislative Library.

Luck and timing were on Gosnell's side. Visitors to the Parliament Buildings will notice that the Library wing is the most ornate portion of the Buildings. The Library itself is undoubtedly one of the most aesthetically pleasing areas of all. It was built later than the main Buildings (1915) when the Province was experiencing an economic boom. The Librarian and his associates, at a time when government financial accountability was minimal had carte blanche to build a library building and

bibliographic collections which would be the envy of most Canadian provinces for generations.

For many of those early years the name Provincial Library was apt. The Library provided service to a much wider clientele than simply the members of the assembly, and in fields somewhat removed from legislative library services. In 1894 Gosnell planned an institution capable of answering inquiries for people throughout the Province and as late as the 1950s a provincial reference service available to anyone was still promoted by the Library on a Vancouver radio station.

In 1898 the Legislative Library began a travelling library service which provided boxes of books to communities lacking public library service. It continued until 1917 when the Public Library Commission (now the Library Services Branch, Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Recreation and Culture) was established and assumed responsibility for travelling libraries.



Joan A. Barton is Director of the British Columbia Legislative Library.

Gosnell also turned his attention to the history of the Province and began, in 1893, to establish a separate collection of material related to British Columbia's history. The collection became the nucleus of the Provincial Archives, whose separate existence was recognized in 1908 when the title Provincial Archivist was given to librarian E.O.S. Scholefield who became the first Provincial Librarian and Archivist. The magnificent copper beech tree on the lawn outside the Library wing was planted in 1921 by Premier John Oliver in memory of Scholefield.

In view of the variety of services then provided it is not surprising that the institution should for so long have called itself and been acknowledged the Provincial Library. The wider services were created, often at great hardship, to meet a genuine need. Before 1900 there were few libraries in the Province and even fewer were adequately supported financially. There were no academic libraries and only three public - Victoria, New Westminster and Vancouver. The Legislative Library filled the void and there can be no doubt that it was the single most influential phenomenon in the early development of libraries in British Columbia.

Thus a Legislative Library, established to serve Legislators adopted a multi-purpose function, serving government departments, researchers and the general public. Preoccupation with this multi-purpose role may even have distracted the library from its original mandate. With increased development of public library services, the establishment of major universities and the building of their extensive academic collections, with the dispersal of ministries away from the Legislative precinct, the growth of self-contained ministerial library services and with the actual physical and administrative separation of the Library and the Archives, it became not only possible but essential to re-examine the role the "Provincial Library" was attempting to play.

By the early 1970s the Library's involvement in services to the general public and to government agencies which had their own libraries was largely redundant. Longer, more sophisticated legislative sessions and a greater emphasis on caucus research demanded that the strictly legislative function had to be emphasized and strengthened. In 1974 the institution ceased to call itself the Provincial Library and returned to the statutory title of Legislative Library and to its

statutory mandate of legislative services as its prime function.

On February 22nd, 1985 the Legislative Assembly passed new Standing Orders which vested management and control of the Library with the Speaker of the Assembly. The change ended a traditional relationship of shared control between the Office of the Speaker and the Ministry of Provincial Secretary.

Despite these changes however the Library's traditional role of service to all people lingers on. On a daily basis library staff play the juggling act between its legitimate clients and those who cling to the belief that a Provincial Library still exists. Indeed significant provincial programs remain. The Cataloguing Division supplies Cataloguing-in-Publication data for the publications of the Province's ministries and crown agencies. Government Publications staff members compile as one of their major functions, the British Columbia Government Publications Monthly Checklist, a monthly bibliography designed to provide the public with knowledge of and access to British Columbia government publications. The Acquisitions Division is involved in several shared programs with the Provincial Archives and Records Service Branch for the preservation of government publications and non-government literary and artistic works. Most significantly reference staff continue to wrestle with the problem of priority information needs for clients. Does a public administrator's request for information on current labour legislation before the House have priority over the backbencher's need for a copy of an obscure poem by W.B. Yeats? Where do the boundaries to service lie?

The Library is in a sense, trapped by history and is likely to continue the intriguing balancing act between its past activities and its stated mandate, for some time to come.