

From a society of estates to a society of citizens: Finnish public libraries become American

This thesis deals with the emergence of the Finnish public library movement due to American influences, when the old popular or “people’s libraries”, that had been established to benefit the poorer sections of the population from the 1890’s onwards began to develop into the new kind of libraries needed by a society undergoing transformation and how treating the American Public Library Movement (PLM) as an innovation can explain this process.

The concepts of innovator, change agent and opinion leader important in the diffusion of innovations also proved to be fruitful in describing the representatives of the library movement and library professionals and re-invention, the application of an innovation to local conditions shed new light on the development in general and on the process of the independence of the libraries from the elementary schools and the other forms of so-called free popular education. But the diffusion research proper did not prove to be a good starting point: library technology, the seemingly appropriate indicator of American influences, was launched from above by the library movement and the state library authorities and is therefore an uncertain sign of local acceptance of the library ideology and, besides, the adoption of various technologies throughout the country is not well enough documented, to be of use for this theses.

The Public Library Movement spread to Finland at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and the spreading process saw an introduction, a breakthrough and a stabilizing period. The period covered by the thesis begins when information on the new kind of American libraries first began to be known in Finland during the 1870’s and ends when the American library ideology during the 1920’s had become the official policy of the state library authorities at the same time as the American type libraries were gaining ground in the practices of the town libraries.

The real core of the research is, however, the birth of a Finnish version of the PLM from the 1890’s onwards. It consists of two parts the first of which is the time of the amateurs in the library movement including an opening and the time the Society for Popular Education (Kansanvalistusseura, KVS) in the lead and the second the beginnings of professionalization from about 1910 onwards.

Towards the end of the 1880’s Finland had become a fairly favourable ground for innovations. The towns were especially up-to-date: influences were obtained and lively contacts were maintained with the other Nordic countries and elsewhere in Europe and urban services such as libraries were spreading, even if they at first did not much resemble the new American public libraries. The

German model with separate libraries for the upper and lower classes was also known and practised in Finnish towns.

The present concept of the public library as a channel for all citizens to obtain information, skills and recreation began to gain general acceptance during the 1890's which in many ways was an important decade for the birth of a civic society in Finland. Changes in attitudes towards the library were part of nation-building and of the general trend towards more liberal and democratic views. Even the library was seen as a tool in raising the level of education of the people and supporting the goals of the social movements. The model was provided by the American public library.

In Finland many of the principles of the Public Library Movement were already known from the practices of European forms of libraries, such as reading societies, commercial lending libraries and libraries for the common people, the so-called "people's libraries" The innovation was that people from all social classes had a common library, where all the new principles were applied.

The American Public Library Movement started in Boston at the beginning of the 1850's. From there it spread to the rest of New England, where the states in rapid succession passed library laws, and then to the other parts of the United States. The library movement was based on an optimistic faith in education and on a belief in the ability and desire of the people to develop through self-education. The public library was supposed to serve all citizens regardless of age, social class, wealth or opinions. For that reason the use of the libraries should be free and their maintenance an obligation of society. Even if donations were an important source of funding, libraries were in principle run on tax revenues, because in that way the economy of the libraries was secured at the same time as the patrons were committed to them as their owners. A logical consequence of this was that the patrons had a right to acquire the books they wanted, even if the libraries as tools of education maintained their standard. Only books that were judged low-quality and harmful were excluded from the collections. The libraries, in fact, should not contain books that nobody read, however high-quality they otherwise might have been. Books that were considered difficult were purchased, because it was believed that people could be educated to read them and, on the other hand, even lighter books were tolerated as a way to more valuable reading.

To attain the goals of the Library Movement a corps of trained librarians and an advanced library technology were needed. In fact its position was not consolidated until the American Library Association, ALA, and the Library Journal were established during the 1870's, and the first library schools were created towards the end of the 1880's, and, in fact, many of the features that have been considered essential for the American Library Movement, such as separate children's libraries and open access, did not become general before the 1890's.

The Public Library Movement was originally an urban phenomenon and in Finland the genuine development of libraries also began in towns. Towns could afford libraries and in them there were also more people in need of a library than

in the rural areas. Library services were considered important for social reasons and the people's libraries were developed to serve all the inhabitants. The Finnish library movement, however, did not start from the towns. It has its roots in the small rural libraries and in the activities of the Society for Popular Education.

At the turn of the century there were approximately 2000 small people's libraries in Finland. Their ownership varied, even if the trend was towards a municipal or municipally supported library model. School libraries or libraries at schools had a certain juridical legitimation in a paragraph of the Statutes on Primary Schools from the year 1866, a paragraph that was eagerly referred to during the early years of the Finnish library movement. It was not, however, schools or school authorities that became the central actor in the library development, but the Society for Popular Education. This was established in 1874 by Finnish nationalist circles, mostly the so-called Fennomans, to produce and distribute cheap, popular literature and to awaken the desire for knowledge and culture among the people. Therefore it was based more on their desire to promote the Finnish language and the position of the Finnish-speaking people than on the ideals of democracy and equality and through them on the needs of private citizens, which were relatively early essential in the American Public Library Movement. That is why the development of library network and rural libraries, which in America gained weight only in the mature stage of the library movement, were in Finland central from the beginning. The beginning of our library network is clearly in the old people's libraries even if our modern public libraries with reason seek their ideological roots in the reading societies of the end of the 18th century.

At the beginning the American influences did not come directly from America to the early Finnish library movement even if contacts with America as such had become livelier towards the turn of the century and there were significant numbers of Finnish immigrants. A practical example of an American type library could, however, be seen closer at hand in Norway, which at the beginning of the 20th century had the best-developed library system among the Scandinavian countries. The Finnish promoters of popular education, who had other contacts to Norway as well, had there, in Kristiania (since 1924 Oslo), an opportunity to see a modern, well-organized library of the American type and could borrow a library model suitable to their goals. Later on Denmark and England with its own version of the public library movement also became important models. Especially to Norway, which during the period of this research was the main goal of the Finnish study tours, the American library ideology came very directly. The Norwegian librarians attended American library schools and applied the American practices in their work at home.

Because of the general goals of the KVS, the coverage of the library network and solid economy and free use of the libraries were central in its library program. Therefore creating municipal library networks was regarded of primary importance, and because of the KVS' authoritative position in library matters, its views were generally adopted. That is why in Finland, in contrast for example to Sweden, the library network was from the beginning mostly based

on municipal libraries with little attention to other library forms, even if there was a considerable number of libraries of the youth societies movement etc. and especially before the civil war of 1918 libraries for working class movement. The People's Library Law of 1928 still mentioned the society libraries as possible recipients of state subsidies.

The idea of a municipal library network was already launched 1879 in the book *Tietoja ja mietteitä Suomen kansa- ja lastenkirjastoista* (Information and thoughts on Finnish people's and children's libraries) by the versatile educator and pioneer of libraries Kaarle Werkko, but it became an official policy of the KVS only after it was approved at a meeting in 1899. The goal was a municipal library network consisting of a main library and branch libraries as well as children's libraries. This plan gained official recognition in the report of the Committee on People's Libraries from 1906, which in the 1920's became a ground for the development of the public libraries.

Creating libraries was only one way to further popular education and they were not necessarily regarded as independent organisations. During the 1890's, however, they began to gain prominence in the program of the KVS and in the early years of the new century the library movement reached a stage which could be called as semi-professional. The library techniques were borrowed from America and the rhetoric used clearly followed the American model. Even if the most prominent librarians still were only part-time, their views of the libraries were thoroughly Americanized.

The connection between the libraries and democracy was one of the main arguments of the Public Library Movement and one basically different from the goals attributed to the people's libraries. The people were seen as active citizens with a need for and right to information. The views combining libraries and the raising of the educational level of the nation with the maintenance of peace in society became more widespread in Finland, especially after the general strike of 1905 and the first elections under the reformed electoral law in 1907 had shattered the idealistic image of the people that educated classes had cherished.

The People's Library Committee of 1906 established the position of the early Finnish library movement. The setting of the Committee by the government (Senate) could be seen as official recognition for the goals of the KVS, but in its membership and work the tension between the National Board of Education (koulutoimen yllähallitus) and the library movement concerning the nature and administration of the libraries situated in the elementary schools also became apparent. The development of Finnish literature had made a differentiation of the library services possible and in the library movement, in the light of foreign examples, it was no longer believed that the library services in general were best arranged by the schools, even if they were thought suitable places for children's libraries and there were hopes of recruiting teachers as librarians. The Board of Education on the other hand wanted to have the organization and administration of the libraries connected with the school authorities.

The few professional librarians in Finland had little to do with the spreading of American influences. The leaders of the first wave of the library movement were popular educators, proponents of the library ideology, such as Kaarle

Werkko, whose attempt to create a separate library association in 1892 can be seen as a first sign of a modern library movement in Finland. Even if the attempt came to nothing and the libraries were left in the hands of the KVS, it was a definite step towards the ideals of the Public Library Movement to a strengthening of the identity of the emerging Finnish library movement. At that time the library work within the KVS also began to be more effective and to really change, and there began to develop a more professional attitude towards libraries and librarianship. The key person in all this was A.A. Granfelt, the secretary and all-in-all of the KVS. The innovation began to spread. The essential thing was that a large enough group of influential persons accepted the American ideals. Efficiency became an important goal, if one wanted to serve all and raise the lending figures. It was necessary to use innovations such as classifications, catalogues, loan-systems and open access and create a network to make co-operation feasible. The KVS library meeting in 1905 and the Committee of 1906 were an important overture to a new stage, which in about 1910 led to a breakthrough in the library movement.

Then under the influence of the KVS the terms of an independent library movement began to be met: a separate association, a journal and professional training. At the same time a controversy concerning the organization of the libraries began to create strife between the KVS and the new Library Association (Suomen kirjastoseura).

When nothing substantial came of the 1906 committee report, the activity of the library movement led to a new Central Library Committee. Its report in 1914 recommended a state library responsible for developing library technique, advisory work, ambulatory collections, interlibrary loans and later also library education and a special library authority for state subsidies and general supervision of the libraries. The decision of Parliament in favour of the proposition was buried in the turbulent times of the civil war and its aftermath.

The internal development and influence in society of the Finnish library movement were connected with the professionalization of librarianship, which can be traced in the subject matter and scope of the published guidebooks and library education and also in the goals of the study-tours. The connection seems clear, because during the 1920's, when decisions about organizing the state library authorities were made, the library movement, which had accepted the American principles, could not Americanize the views of the political decision-makers concerning the libraries. They were not seen as essential, there was no willingness to spend on them or they were supported by the wrong circles etc. There was not yet enough practical experience of the library innovation to make it acceptable.

During the legislation process in the 1920's the more influential popular educators had their views about the libraries accepted and the administration and organization of the libraries was not to become satisfactory from the point of view of the library movement proper. In practical library work, however, the American ideals and techniques began gradually to gain ground through the activities of the State Library Bureau (Valtion kirjastotoimisto, founded in 1921) even in the rural libraries.

The development was, however, slow. That depended not only on the difficulty of changing the general views concerning the libraries, but on the severe depression of the 1930's and the war-years in the 1940's which made it impossible to use the potential inherent in the popular library law. Only during the 1950's did the public libraries reach all municipalities in Finland, and the American model of the public library became a reality everywhere only during the 1970's following the opportunities created by a new library law at the beginning of the previous decade.