

THE PROGRESSIVE LIBRARIANS COUNCIL AND ITS FOUNDERS

by Rosalee McReynolds

Half a century before the formation of the Progressive Librarians Guild, a group of liberal-minded people established an organization with uncanny similarities, both in name and in concept. The Progressive Librarians' Council was the brainchild of ALA members who felt the association did not adequately represent their views on major social issues. These upstarts were progressives of the old school, having come of age in the era of "Fighting Bob" La Follette and the drive for political reform. Their organization endured from 1939 until the late 1940s, and at its peak boasted some 250 members throughout the United States. Among the most active chapters were those in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C.¹

A librarian named Philip Keeney supplied the initial drive behind PLC, which chartered itself at the 1939 ALA conference in San Francisco. Like many fledgling associations, it took a while for the Council to draw up its bylaws and a slate of candidates for office, but by September of that year it had issued a publication, the *PLC Bulletin*, and a statement of purpose: "to support and strengthen the efforts of the Third Activities Committee in bringing more democracy into the structure and functioning of the American Library Association; to promote federal and state aid for libraries by supporting the Thomas-Harrison Bill and strengthening state library agencies; to unite all progressive librarians whose single voices are inaudible into a group which will be heard."²

Of these goals, the third one should strike an immediate chord with librarians living in the late twentieth century, but the meaning of the first two has been clouded with the passage of time. The Third Activities Committee was a special task force of ALA, set up largely in response to complaints about the association's oligarchic structure. This structure concentrated power in the hands of a few ALA officers and staff members, and assigned near-dictatorial authority to the office of executive secretary. As a result of recommendations from the Third Activities Committee, ALA became more democratic by giving greater influence to the general membership. Perhaps most importantly, the ALA council was reconfigured to equalize repre-

sentation from all regions of the country and from the association's diverse interest groups.

That the subject of federal aid once sparked controversy among librarians seems rather quaint in 1990, a time when no amount of government assistance to libraries appears excessive. Yet, this issue once divided the profession. Those librarians who objected to federal aid were leery of the government sticking its nose into library business, and while this could be interpreted as a liberal or even radical point of view, those who held it generally were conservative. These conservatives were able to remain comfortably in the status quo for a long time, for it wasn't until 1956 that the Library Services Act was finally signed into law.

With federal aid a seemingly hopeless cause and with work by the Third Activities Committee completed, the PLC quickly moved beyond its original statement of purpose. By 1940, the group had expanded its agenda to include censorship, job security and tenure for librarians, as well as better library service to remote communities.³ As international conflict loomed on the horizon, it also was inevitable that the Council would have to consider world issues. In May 1940, the PLC took such action by sending a letter to President Roosevelt in which he was urged to avoid bringing the United States into war.⁴ After Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the group modified this position, but lent only guarded support to America's participation in the war.

The PLC's pacifistic outlook should not be taken as a sign that its members were isolationists, *per se*, or that they had no interests beyond American libraries. Spain's Civil War was a major source of concern for the group whose most ambitious project was smuggling money to Spanish Loyalists exiled in France. The specific recipients of this generosity were a librarian named Teresa Andres and her husband Emilio. Unable to flee to Mexico as planned, the two remained in Paris and participated in the Resistance. Following World War II, Keeney's wife Mary Jane traveled to Europe with an American reparations mission and met Teresa Andres for the first time. Sadly, the Spanish librarian who had struggled through two wars died shortly after this meeting. The Keeney's, along with other members of the PLC, continued to send money and clothing to Emilio and his young son.⁵

Since the PLC barely existed after the war, it would be more accurate to say that alumni of the organization continued to send contributions. In the June 1944 issue of the *PLC Bulletin* (the last number published), Mary Jane Keeney outlined the difficulties of sustaining the organization: despite the "official" pro-peace stance of the PLC, many members had joined the armed services or had left librarianship to accept war related jobs. The Keeneys themselves had obtained non-library employment in the government. Just as importantly, with the suspension of ALA conferences for the years 1943 through 1945, the PLC lost its annual opportunity to bring members together for face to face meetings. They managed to convene again at the Buffalo ALA conference in 1946, but apparently for the last time.⁶

While the Keeneys must have suffered some pangs of regret over the decline of "their" organization, they were pleased by the PLC's achievements, which included the bedevilment of ALA's leadership. In at least two instances, the PLC's actions were not just irksome, but downright embarrassing for the larger organization. The so-called Peace Letter to Roosevelt was particularly vexing because it had been phrased in such a way that it almost appeared to be from the American Library Association. ALA officers made a desperate effort to dissociate themselves from the letter, sending the President their own agitated missive in which they claimed that most librarians would disagree with the position of the Progressive Librarians Council. Of course, they had no way of knowing this.

The other major annoyance created by the PLC was its endorsement of Archibald MacLeish's nomination for Librarian of Congress in 1939. Then, as now, many librarians were troubled by the idea that the nation's chief librarian was not a trained member of the profession, and the American Library Association opposed MacLeish's candidacy. Further complicating matters in 1939 was the fact that Carl Milam, ALA's executive secretary, coveted the post for himself.⁷ MacLeish, of course, became Librarian of Congress and insult was only added to injury when he appeared as guest speaker at the PLC meeting held in tandem with the 1940 ALA conference.⁸

These jabs at the American Library Association may have been by design rather than by accident, for the Keeneys' differences with ALA were personal as well as ideological and dated back to a particularly bitter episode in their lives. The events that added up to

this episode took place at Montana State University in Missoula (now called the University of Montana) where Philip Keeney had been hired as head librarian in 1931. In 1935, the Montana State Board of Education demanded that the novel *Passions Spin the Plot* by Vardis Fisher, as well as “similar books”, be removed from all university libraries in the state of Montana. Keeney reluctantly complied with the order but quietly alerted faculty members at institutions in neighboring states about the board’s action. Anti-censorship protests from these outsiders only served to rankle the board, most of whose members knew that Keeney was in some way involved.

Just a few months after the board demanded the suppression of offending literature, it appointed a new president for Montana State University. The appointment was clearly politically motivated and made over the objections of many faculty members, including Keeney. Further alienating him from the administration were his poorly disguised efforts to establish a chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) on the campus. It was clearly just a matter of time before the axe fell, and in 1937 the errant librarian was fired without regard to the niceties of due process.⁹

Keeney decided to fight his dismissal and sought the help from several organizations, including the AFT, the American Association of University Professors, and the American Civil Liberties Union. From these groups, he gained monetary and legal assistance that enabled him to carry his case through the courts. Scores of other professional and labor organizations quickly lent moral support by issuing statements on Keeney’s behalf. It was much needed moral support since litigation dragged on for two years (during which time Keeney was unemployed) and eventually led to the Montana State Supreme Court. In 1939, Keeney obtained a ruling in his favor, entitling him to reinstatement in his job as well as back pay. He accepted the money, but returned to Missoula as university librarian for only a few months.

Of the major groups from whom Keeney sought aid, the American Library Association proved least receptive, even though the association’s executive board had voted in 1936 to investigate dismissals that appeared to be unjustified. ALA officers insisted that they could not perform their duty because they hadn’t given any funds for the purpose.¹⁰ A statement of support would not have cost the association a dime, but it wasn’t until June 1938 — long after

many other organizations had responded to the case — that ALA issued a resolution conceding that Keeney had not received a fair and impartial hearing from Montana State University.¹¹ Despite being ignored by ALA, Keeney became well known throughout the library profession and something of a hero. Luckily for him, he also captured the attention of people who could help him get a job. It just might have been a coincidence, but Keeney was employed at the Library of Congress just a few months after the Progressive Librarians' Council gave its endorsement to Archibald MacLeish.

After working at the Library of Congress for three years, and after a brief stint with the Foreign Economic Administration, Keeney took on a unique task. Under the auspices of the War Department, he went to Occupied Japan to assess the damage to, and future of, libraries in that country. From January 1946 to April 1947, he traveled throughout Japan meeting librarians and absorbing Japanese culture.¹² As a self-professed leftist, he was very intrigued by the activities of the country's communist party and he shared this interest with Mary Jane through his letters to her. Unbeknownst to the Keeneys, their mail was being read by the FBI.

In the late 1940s, the American government officially cracked down on employees whose politics were considered disloyal. Mary Jane resigned from her job in the State Department before she could be fired. Philip was dismissed from the War Department without any official explanation in April 1947. The situation was painfully reminiscent of the one they had been in a decade before, but this time the Keeneys shared it with hundreds of other people. In 1949, the couple joined the unfortunate procession of people called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Like most people called before the committee, the Keeneys weren't charged with any crime, but their careers were effectively ruined. The PLC being dead, and ALA leadership thoroughly disapproving of Philip Keeney, no library organization spoke out on his behalf. No mention of his troubles — not even his "retirement" from duties in Japan — appeared in the library press. Daniel Melcher, the publisher of *Library Journal* at the time, was a personal friend of the Keeneys so it is especially curious that nothing appeared in that periodical.¹³ For all purposes, Philip Keeney had become a non-person in the library world.

Philip and Mary Jane Keeney were not the kind of people to fold their tents and quietly steal away. That's precisely what made them so adorable to their friends and so loathsome to their enemies. Within months of their unplanned departure from federal employment, the Keeneys were devising a scheme of library service for countries that were either undeveloped or socialist in outlook. They found themselves a potential customer in the form of the Czech government, but the whole plan was scuttled when the State Department refused to issue passports to the Keeneys, citing the pair as security risks.¹⁴

Mary Jane then managed to get a job with the United Nations, but that evaporated when the United States pressured the UN to weed out American employees with leftist sentiments. It wasn't a complete loss, however: the UN paid her a few thousand dollars in damages and with this money the Keeney's embarked on a venture completely in keeping with the beat trend of the 1950s. They rented themselves a space in Greenwich Village and opened a movie theatre that they called Club Cinema. Most of the films were in foreign languages with subtitles, and occasionally a showing would be preceded by folksingers or by a poetry reading. Club Cinema lasted until the end of the decade when the building in which it was housed was torn down.¹⁶ In their old age, the Keeneys drifted away from their library friends, including people who had belonged to the Progressive Librarians' Council. Philip Keeney died in 1962 at the age of seventy-one. Mary Jane, also at the age of seventy-one, died in 1969.

There is probably little point in sentimentalizing the Keeneys or what they accomplished through the Progressive Librarians' Council. If nothing else, the PLC served as an irritant that changed the American Library Association. Those changes may now be imperceptible, but without organizations like the Progressive Librarians' Council the American Library Association would be even more conservative than it is. Even "gadflies" are vital, and no one knew that better than Philip and Mary Jane Keeney.

Notes

1. Figures of the PLC's membership count are taken from the *PLC Bulletin* 5, no.3, June 1944, p.7; the geographic strengths of the organization are also reflected in assorted issues of the *Bulletin*.
2. *PLC Bulletin* 1, no.1, Sept. 1939, p.1.
3. The PLC's evolving agenda can be traced through individual issues of the *PLC Bulletin*. The organization's position is also summed up by Joe Kraus in "The Progressive Librarians' Council" *Library Journal* (July 1972).
4. Dennis Thomison, *A History of the American Library Association, 1876-1972*, Chicago: American Library Association, 1978, p.143.
5. FBI file for Nathan G. Silvermaster. File 65-56402-WFO100-17493: Report of Courtland C. Jones, p.105657.
6. FBI file for Nathan G. Silvermaster. File 65-56402-WFO100-17493: mail cover, excerpt of letter from Edith Lawrence to Mary Jane Keeney, p.66. Lawrence, of Berea College in Ohio, was the last chairperson of the PLC.
7. Thomison, pp.139-142.
8. *PLC Bulletin* 2, no.1, Aug. 1944, p.4.
9. A lengthy discussion of the Keeney Case may be found in *The Keeney Case: Big Business, Higher Education, and Organized Labor, Report of an Investigation*, Chicago: American Federation of Teachers, 1939.
10. Milton J. Ferguson, "Case for Careful Investigation," *Library Journal*, June 15, 1937, p.512.
11. "Keeney Resolution", *ALA Bulletin*, July 1938, p.455.
12. Theodore F. Welch, Toshokan: *Libraries in Japanese Society*, London: Clive Bingley; Chicago: American Library Association, 1976, p.93.
13. Melcher's friendship with Keeney is referred to in the latter's appearance before the Committee on Un-American Activities, and is mentioned frequently in FBI file material. See: House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Testimony of Philip O. and Mary Jane Keeney and Statement Regarding their Background*, 81st Congress, 1st session, June 9, 1949, Washington D.C.: GOP, 1949, p.254.
14. *Ibid*, p.233.
15. *New York Times*, July 26, 1949, p.10:3.
16. FBI file for Philip and Mary Jane Keeney. file no.101-467, section 13, n.p.