Effie Louise Power: Pioneer Children’s Librarian

Effie Louise Power was a pioneer in library children’s services. As a librarian and a library educator, Power encouraged professional collaboration among children’s librarians and partnerships between libraries and schools. She is best remembered as the author of the first authoritative text on children’s services, *Library Service for Children*, published in 1930. Prior to Power, who was the first librarian hired specifically for children’s work,¹ children’s librarians had no special training.

Power came to the Cleveland Public Library in 1885 as a 22-year old apprentice under the guidance of her family friend and neighbor, the fondly-remembered and influential librarian William Howard Brett. The enthusiastic and tireless energy that characterized Power’s lifelong career suggests she was a bright and eager apprentice librarian. Brett put her in charge of the central library’s newly created children’s room her very first year. Here, we should take a moment to imagine the environment this young woman stepped into:

The Cleveland Public Library typified the ambivalent, but ultimately positive, institutional attitude toward children’s library service. Children were allowed to enter the library from its opening in 1869, with those over 14 able to check out books with parental permission. By 1876 children accounted for 15 percent of the library’s total circulation. This statistic…was “remedied” by curtailing the purchase of children’s books entirely.  

Power’s mentor, Brett, began purchasing books for children when he became director in 1884. In 1895, the children’s room was created and Power was hired to run it. Again, we are tempted to credit Power with the 1897 creation of the Cleveland Public Library League, an organization of 12,000 children pledged to the motto “clean hands, clean hearts, clean books” though the literature does not specify who was behind it. Given Power’s amazing drive and organizational abilities, along with the talent to rally her community, it is very likely it was she. Power was an advocate of cleanliness (in fact she was known to bring children home and scrub them in the family tub). In Library Services for Children, she assures us that though “parents are likely to consider books as factors in the spread of contagious or communicable disease…” the danger from this source has doubtless been exaggerated. Books, however, that have been handled by persons

2Ibid. p. 128.
3Ibid. p. 129.
suffering with one of the readily communicable diseases should always be disinfected before they are again used.” She also cautioned against things that might soil the joy of reading for children; for instance, the “machine-made incidents with dull repetition” of the Bobbsey Twins books (“not recommended”). Yet Power didn’t disdain popular or juvenile fiction; she discusses dime novels and lurid “shockers” without explicitly approving or condemning, but merely commenting “these characters were a new and picturesque representation of the eternal hero.” This willingness to recognize that children have literary tastes is foundational to Power’s library philosophy, which she passed on as a professional pioneer. When she began librarianship, it was assumed that children would only read non-fiction under duress. Power wrote:

Every day, I would go about the library and gather up travel, biography, history and nature books either written for, or suited to, children and young people. I would arrange them on the counters of the children’s alcove. Every day, they melted away like snow, exploding the theory that children wanted only fiction.

Effie Power was not only willing to listen to her patrons and provide them the opportunity to expand their reading, she developed “very strong convictions as to what should be included in training courses for those who are to guide the reading habits and tastes of the world’s children,” and together with Brett, she developed the fundamentals of librarianship for children. “The tenets they laid down were: 1) a love for children; 2) a knowledge of children’s books (“the right book to the right child at the right time”); 3) and understanding of children and the educational process; and 4) a knowledge of library

---

5 Ibid. p. 72.
8 Ibid. p. 413.
methods.” Power proceeded to get a degree in education and taught children’s librarianship, storytelling and children’s literature in library schools all over the country. She worked in several different library systems, though she returned to the Cleveland Public Library in several different capacities, even introducing the “Book Caravan” in 1926, a precursor to the bookmobile. In the 1920s she also transformed the Cleveland library’s training class in children’s work into a full-fledged master’s program in conjunction with Western Reserve University. Power also wrote several thick books of stories for children and a revision to her textbook, now titled *Work With Children In Public Libraries*. Power lists the “necessary personal attributes of children’s librarians included initiative, forcefulness, imagination, tact, and interest in people, adaptability, courtesy, and patience.”

Effie Power never felt that working with children was an inferior type of librarianship. Library historian Kimball calls Power’s return to the Cleveland Public Library an ironic homecoming for Power, “a successful professional woman in a female-intensive child welfare profession.” In fact, she was firmly convinced of the universal importance of children’s library services, beyond the influence on children themselves. In a time that most children were full-time farm or factory workers by age 14, Power envisioned her young patrons developing the self-education skills and habits that could carry them through after traditional schooling had left them behind.

She further believed that children’s librarians had a wider and more intimate contract with the family life of a city than any other group of library workers, and therefore, could influence other librarians in their approach to patrons. Her philosophy dictated that children’s librarians

---

9 Ibid. p. 413.
11 Kimball. p. 924.
could offer other library workers (especially those working with new Americans) techniques in library instruction, story hours, reading clubs and close work with both large and small groups.  

Power was a pioneer of a new, progressive tradition that Library historian Wiegand “characterized by several essential elements: specialized collections, separate areas or rooms, specially trained personnel, and services designed to bring children and library materials together, all existing in a network of relationships with other child welfare agencies.” This focus on child welfare is an essential part of Power’s philosophy and enduring legacy. She worked on a municipal scale, forging cooperative partnerships with local schools. She worked on a national level, initiating the new formal training programs for children’s library services. She worked on the personal level, encouraging the young Langston Hughes, then a high school student and Cleveland Public Library youth services patron. She would later encourage (how pointedly we do not know, though her track record proves she was a very effective encourager) Hughes to publish a book of poetry for children. Hughes wrote to Power, to thank her for her work editing this book,

His letter arrived on the same day that Power received correspondence from Della McGregor [chair of the ALA’s Section for Library Work With Children, who was as chair] who asked Power’s advice on a suitable person ‘to write an article on the book needs of the Negro children in the South’…Power responded immediately, suggesting to McGregor that Hughes write the article and encouraging Hughes to give his consent.

Over and over, biographers cite her skill in bringing people together, encouraging

12 Ibid. p. 413.
13 Wiegand. p. 128.
14 Kimball. p. 928.
cooperation. Cooperation is a cornerstone of library professionalism, and the alliances Power forged between libraries and schools, library systems, and library education helped to grow librarianism into a distinct discipline.

She did fail at one thing: retirement. Power retired from the Cleveland Public Library in 1937, but continued to teach at Columbia University’s library school for two more years. She moved to Pompano Beach, Florida in 1939, to finally “spend time reading, resting and writing ‘in a sunny, roomy home.’” Always one to keep active in her community, Power led fundraising efforts to rebuild the Pompano Beach Public Library, which had fallen to a hurricane some twenty years before. When the librarian resigned, she took over the job herself, while revising her seminal textbook for second publication. When Effie Power retired for good in 1948, all of Pompano Beach cooperated to give her a whole-town celebration. Effie Louise Power died in 1969.

**Bibliographic Note**

There is an unfortunate lack of material on Effie Powers, and probably on most prominent librarians. We are quiet folk and don’t seem to inspire the same kind of biographical zeal that presidents and explorers do. Both biographical dictionaries cited, as well as the Kimball article, show that Effie Power was an amazing force of vision and personality. Her own writings evidence a warm but wry sense of humor and the kind of liberal open-mindedness that is not particularly characteristic of the middle class at the dawn of the 20th century. She really was an amazing professional and her text on children’s librarianship is still relevant. It was surprising to find only one journal article on her, and one other mentioning her work.