

Manx Notes 488 (2020)

“WHO IS MONA DOUGLAS?” (13)

“THE JOBS THEY DO: THE ISLAND’S LIBRARIAN”
(1952)



“Read any good books lately?” Never ask a librarian this—it you want to get home for tea. For what they haven’t read they can recommend from reviews they have read.

No, it’s a dangerous question. So I didn’t put it to Miss Mona Douglas, the Island’s rural librarian, when I was asking about her job. But I was still late for tea because there’s a lot of work in a library serving 72 rural centres and three branches, in Peel, Onchan and Port Erin.

Miss Douglas operates the service for the whole Island from her library headquarters in Hanover Street School, Douglas. She gets about £1,800 a year from the Education Authority to pay for it.

A thousand pounds goes to the book fund, and £800 is left for expenses and salaries for some six people.

So education ratepayers needn't think they are keeping librarians in cigars or Paris hats.

Most of the rural centres are in schools, and this Miss Douglas doesn't like "because people are diffident about going into school buildings, and they are only open during school hours anyway."

Though funds make the proposition a tough one, Miss Douglas is trying to dispense with schools, even using church halls in preference; folks are less timorous about going there.

But where schools have to be used, and that is still in most of the isolated rural areas, school children and teachers help keep the countryfolk literary-minded. Pupils ask for books for their parents and teacher chooses what she thinks pa or ma will like.

"What we really need, though, is a travelling library van to get to the people's homes." Miss Douglas will tell you. "I tried to get one a few years ago, and I'm still hoping we'll get one yet." Travelling vans are common in the rural counties of England "Why should the Isle of Man not be as up-to-date?" Miss Douglas asks.

Most of the centres have between 200 and 300 books at a time, and they are changed every four months. Miss Douglas uses the Isle of Man Railway to deliver the books which are despatched in large wooden cases holding 50 each.

Most of the books sent out are fiction, but there is also a good selection of non-fiction, particularly history, biography, and travel books. Requests from the centres are few, most people wanting a particular book come to town and ask Miss Douglas personally for it. If it is a technical textbook the library does not possess, Miss Douglas can nevertheless get the book in a week or so from the Scottish Central Library for Students at no cost to the reader except one-way postage. But in most cases the library can meet the request itself.

Though not always. While we were talking, one young man came in asking for the Webbs' *History of Trade Unionism*. Nota bene, Mr Moughtin, they didn't have it. Still, they did have Cole's *History of the Labour Party*, and, to suit Mr Bolton's side, a treatise on the Companies Act, 1948. Intriguing juxtaposition on the next shelf was a copy of the Bible, and next to it Burrow's "Bible in Spain."

With the task of buying approximately 2,000 new books every year, Miss Douglas makes up her list from the "Times Literary Supplement." Other book reviews and numerous publishers lists which reach her by almost every post. This list she submits to a small sub-committee of the Education Authority, who also make suggestions and work out the final list.

Is there any censorship? Well, Miss Douglas puts her position like this: “We have a public censor of books and I think it impertinent for anyone else to take up his prerogative. Of course some people think there should be a local censorship, and some few, very few, books are not displayed. But any responsible person asking for them can take them out.”

As most Islanders know, Miss Douglas is a student of Manx history, literature, and language. And naturally she sees that her library has a good selection of Manx books.

“We can supply most readers’ requests. If we can’t, we send them to the Museum. But with the increase in the Manx language classes a lot of students come for books here because they can take them home.”

There are no fines for overdue books in the Rural Library, indeed no restrictions at all. Asked about this, Miss Douglas said, “The modern trend in libraries is to place no barrier between reader and book, and I think it is a good trend.”

Are the Manx book-lovers? Miss Douglas thinks they compare favourably with the average English reader. They have their peculiarities though.

For instance, the folks on the west coast read more than those on our eastern seaboard. Why? Miss Douglas thinks the pioneering work of the Peel Ward Library might have something to do with it.

Then an interesting, but not surprising, preference of the seagoing Manx is for travel books and sea yarns. Books like “The Kon Tiki Expedition” are tremendously popular here.

What does Miss Douglas read herself? “Everything and anything. Whatever I can lay my hands on. I will read a dictionary, a time-table, if I can find nothing better.” Miss Douglas in fact was an avid reader before she could write assuredly. “I got my first library ticket when I was five; they had to guide my hand to sign my name. My parents were living in Liverpool then, and the Liverpool librarian used to keep me all the new fairy story books that came in.”

What do you read now for pure recreation? I asked. You are tired, home after a hard day’s work: what do you read then? “Poetry.” Modern poetry? “Yes. I’ll read Eliot, Auden, McNeice, but I always go back to the classics. My favourite poet has always been W. B. Yeats,” and his influence upon Miss Douglas’s own style is obvious to those who have read her own fine Manx poems.

Pseud [initialled as “A.P.”]. “[The Jobs They Do] The Island’s Librarian.”
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Another piece of the jigsaw that makes up the biography of Mona Douglas.

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