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## **Building resilient public libraries with Carnegie in South Africa (1927 – 2012): regularities, singularities and South African exceptionalism**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the contribution of Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) to the development of public libraries in South Africa from 1927 to 2012. It charts this through a parallel examination of two of CCNY's three South African Inquiries into Poverty, attempting to find links between the idea of the public library as an engine of development (a principle underling Carnegie's belief in public libraries) and the theme of the Inquiries. It concludes by summarising how the public library developments in particular periods of South African history, and the Poverty Inquiries, reveal evidence of common ground and of discontinuities, and finally comments on the extent to which South African exceptionalism is manifest in the initiatives.*

**Keywords:** Public libraries, South Africa, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Carnegie Inquiries into Poverty in South Africa,

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### **Introduction**

The historical warrant for linking public library development sponsored by the CCNY with their investigations into poverty in South Africa arises from the coincidence of the First Inquiry into the Poor White Question (1929) and a Commission investigating the state of South African libraries (1928) – two early Carnegie interventions in South Africa, with far-reaching socio-political consequences for contemporary South Africa. A study of these and later initiatives have uncovered a perennial trope in South Africa, the construction of (race)<sup>1</sup> identity, which I shall show to be a dominant leitmotif in the programmes selected for study

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I shall refer to “race” categories according to the use of the time depending on the period under review, without the distracting use of quotation marks or “sic” to indicate my distaste of the philosophy and attitudes underlying these designations. In contemporary democratic South Africa with its philosophy of non-racism, particular designations are used for the purposes of redress: Black (African), Coloured, Indian, White.

in this paper. I shall argue that this examination surfaces issues of continuities and discontinuities spanning the period under the review and also the question the extent to which South African exceptionalism is a feature of the developments analysed.

Andrew Carnegie founded his philanthropic organisation, The Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) in 1911 with an endowment of \$125 million (worth \$2 billion in 2011) to “promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding”, and to do “real and permanent good” (*A century of philanthropy*, 2008). He extended CCNY’s initial scope from the United States to the British Commonwealth in 1912 by creating a fund of \$10m for the British Dominions (which included South Africa) and colonies (Rochester, 1999: 28). As with programmes in the US, grants from this Fund were made for libraries, adult education and professional education for LIS, with the bulk being allocated to Canada in the period 1912-1927 (Rochester, 1996: 346). From 1927-1942 the programme was extended to Africa, Australia and New Zealand and later to the West Indies.

### **CCNY Investigation into Public Libraries in South Africa 1928**

Although a number of individual libraries had been built in South Africa prior to the formation of CCNY, its systematic library development work in South Africa arose out of the establishment of the special fund for use in the Dominions and Colonies. From the mid-1920s the Corporation began to consider the feasibility of investing in South Africa (Dubow, 2001: 109) which was included in CCNY’s purview at the behest of the President Frederick Keppel and Secretary, James Bertram. They noted after their visit in 1927 that “Africa has been overlooked in the US world movements” (Bell, 2000: 486), an observation made at a time when the CCNY was very conscious in the US of escalating modernity, the demands of capital, and the question of labour. Their visit which included interviews with academics and government officials yielded far-reaching results based on their observations that two critical problems were facing the Union: one was the degraded situation of the “Poor Whites” and the other was the poor condition of the nation’s libraries (Coetzee, 1975: 1).

To address the second concern two librarians, an American Milton Ferguson, and a Scot, S A Pitt were commissioned to undertake an investigation into the state of libraries in South Africa. Their investigation spanned a period of three months in 1928 and culminated in a national conference to discuss the findings and consider recommendations. The Commissioners’ findings were published in two individual reports - no explanation is provided in either report for this anomaly. Although Rochester explains that the reason for this is that they disagreed on the question of services for black South Africans (1999: 27) it is difficult to read off their relative positions on this question from their reports. Pitt seems neutral in his view of the racial divide and the South African position that services should be separate, urging that the question of use should be settled: “whether their use is to be restricted to Europeans” (Pitt, 1929: 19). Ferguson is more forthright in his comments on the prevailing race prejudice towards Natives and their possible claim on libraries:

The South African is willing – perhaps he has no other way out – for the native to cook his food, care for his children, keep his household in order, serve him in a personal way, carry his books to and from the library, but he would feel that the end of the regime were at hand if this same servant were permitted to open these books and read therein (Ferguson, 1929: 78).

Their reports outline the following situation:

- the 211 public libraries were neither free nor public as these concepts were understood in the USA and the UK (Pitt, 1929: 7);
- their reach was limited to only 3% of the (white) population – people of means (Pitt, 1929: 8);
- no library legislation, and the absence of a national coordinating system resulting in expensive duplication (Ferguson, 1929: 13-14);
- meagre to non-existent provision for “Non-Europeans” (Pitt, 1929: 18);
- poor supply of books in the vernacular (Ferguson, 1929: 78);
- inadequate staffing, inadequate education and training and no library schools (Ferguson, 1929: 7; 13 - 14).

The Conference to discuss the findings and make recommendations was sponsored by CCNY in November 1928 with a group of about eighty librarians, academics, and government and education officials to chart a way forward. The proceedings of the Conference are outlined in Ferguson’s report (1929: 16 – 29). One of its decisions was the establishment of a free public library service for the country, to be coordinated to avoid duplication. Free services for non-whites would be part of the national system with respect to finance and organisation, with the books being housed separately (Ferguson, 1929: 16; 18). The second major recommendation was the establishment of a library association, modelled on the Library Association of the UK, to foster library development and to promote professional education and training of librarians (Ferguson, 1929: 19). Public library development as an outcome of the Commissioners’ reports, and the National Conference are covered in the later section “Public library development in the 1920s and the 1930s”.

### **Commission of Investigation into the Poor White Question in South Africa**

Following Keppel’s recommendation that the CCNY venture into Africa to encourage its entry into the modern world, the trustees voted funds in 1928 for a Commission of Investigation into the Poor White Question in South Africa (“Carnegie Poor White Study”). The investigation is acknowledged for its pioneering work as the most complex social science study ever conducted in Africa (Golden 2004), and one that would be used to model later investigations. The theme was proposed by a South African politician who, in his proposal to CCNY, claimed a broad base for its scope and minimised the sectarian bias and the intended focus (Bell, 2000: 489), his political constituency of poor Afrikaners.

The Poor Whites referred to in the Investigation were a group of no more than 300 000 white Afrikaners living mainly in rural areas who had missed out on economic development of the previous decades (Golden 2004). In spite of their being foregrounded as subjects of the study, the researchers were struck by the greater incidence and intensity of poverty experienced by black people, representing a “problem of greater magnitude and complexity than ever the Poor White problem was” (Golden, 2004). The research design embraced five disciplines: economics, medicine, psychology, sociology and education.

The Inquiry’s understanding of the poor white situation relied on an analysis of their subjects’ personal character attributes portraying them as possessing a narrow and confused outlook, and lacking enterprise, initiative and self-reliance (Carnegie Commission, 1932: 49). Educationist and initiator of the Inquiry, E G Malherbe authored the report on education which was influential in highlighting the importance of reading and libraries in the education of the subjects of the study. He had tested reading habits of the children in his sample which

he found to be very inadequate in view of the correlation between outstanding educational achievements of any school with a good library (Malherbe 1932: 372). He ended his exposition of the value of a good library in education with the tendentious injunction: “Fewer staff, more books. Rather one teacher with a suitable library, than two teachers” (1932: 372).

CCNY distributed the reports widely in the US and elsewhere and commended them as useful contributions to knowledge that had received an “extraordinary amount of attention”, in South Africa and internationally (Bell, 2000: 494). The 1932 five-volume Report was very influential later in the design of educational and social welfare systems aimed at the development of the target white group (Golden 2004). The CCNY was later to regret its First Inquiry as “its unintended consequence was that it helped create the rationale for establishing the apartheid government” (*A century of philanthropy*, 2008).

### **Public library development in the 1920s and the 1930s**

In 1934 the Corporation made available a sum of \$125 000 for library development (Walker 2011) to set up the national public library service, in keeping with the recommendation of the Commission Reports and the National Conference. Walker describes this endowment fund which would benefit white South Africans as “a concession to the segregated realities of the day” (2011). The fund was also used to establish a library association, named later as the South African Library Association (SALA) modelled on the (British) Library Association (Ferguson 1929: 87).

Ferguson’s comment in his Report that the recommended provision of services for Non-Europeans “seems to raise great fears in the breast of some Europeans” (1929: 21) is borne out by the difficulties experienced in 1931 by the Corporation in finding a suitable authority in the Transvaal to receive its grant of \$5000 to start to give effect to this recommendation (Thomas, 1979: 69). The Carnegie Germiston Public Library, a much smaller library than the well-established libraries of Johannesburg and Pretoria, accepted the task for which it was justifiably congratulated in a Parliamentary Debate on Libraries for “its notable contribution” (*Motion: National Library Policy*. 1941: 1739).

The 1937 *Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Libraries* was issued by the government to give an overview of development thus far, and plans for further development. It usefully summarised Carnegie’s and the CCNY grants in the period 1908–1936 in two tables; the first one referring to library buildings, some of which had been made before the Corporation was set up (*Report of the Interdepartmental Committee*, 1937: 46). The second table reflects grants made as part of the Commissioners’ and the Conference’s recommendations (*Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Libraries*, 1937: 46). The total for the first category was £27 800, while the total for the second category was £71 204 or \$346 2509 (*Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Libraries*, 1937: 46).

**Table 1: Grants made by Carnegie: Library buildings**

1908. Harrismith. £2 000	1912. Potchefstroom. £2 500
1908. Vryheid. £1 500	1914. Germiston. £6 000
1910. Kalk Bay and Muizenberg. £1 600	1916. Newcastle. £1 500
1911. Standerton. £1 500	1918. Barberton. £900
1912. Hopetown. £1 300	1920. Krugersdorp. £4 500
1912. Moorreesburg. £1 500	1923. Benoni. £3 000

**Table 2: Grants for Other Library Purposes**

1928	Bloemfontein Conference	\$2 500
1928	Johannesburg. Circulating library for adult natives	\$5 000
1928	Durban. Library for Indians	\$2 500
1928	Natal, School Library Demonstration	\$2 500
1928	Free State. School Library Demonstration	\$2 500
1928	Cape Town. Circulating library for Schools for Coloured	\$5 000
1928	Survey of Libraries (Pitt and Ferguson)	\$22 500
1928	Grahamstown. Library for the Blind	\$6 000
1928	Witwatersrand. University. Purchase of books	\$25 000
1930	Library Movement	\$6 250
1932	Continuation of Library Movement	\$6 250
1932	Continuation of Library Movement	\$6 250
1932	Pretoria. Development of Central Library	\$125 000
1932	University of Witwatersrand. Purchase of Books	\$27 000
1936	Lovedale Native Press	\$10 000
1936	University of Stellenbosch Library	\$75 000
1936	Establishment of Non-European Library Centres in Eastern Cape	\$5 000
1936	For itinerant Librarian-Organiser for Transvaal Carnegie Non-European Library	\$3 000
1936	Durban. Establishment of Collection of Literature by Negro and African authors	\$2 500
1936	Afrikaans books for the Cape Coloured Library	\$1 500
1936	Grahamstown. South African Library for the Blind	\$5 000

## **The apartheid decades and the Second Inquiry into Poverty**

In the decades during the entrenchment of the apartheid government, the CCNY saw little scope for fruitful interventions until the mid-1970s when interactions with a black leadership group led to Alan Pifer's (President of CCNY at the time) recognising the potential of working with future leaders of a future democratic South Africa (Golden 2004). The consolidation of apartheid and its intensification of pernicious laws was evident also in library sector. Thus at the 1962 National Conference (its name an echo of the 1928 National Conference in Bloemfontein), membership of SALA was restricted to whites only (Taylor 1970: xxxviii), an action of such egregious zeal exceeding even apartheid legislative requirements that it excited the attention of an editorial in *Nature*.

The Second Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa was initiated in 1982 based on Pifer's conviction that such an intervention was timely. It was conducted by groups of academics, and political and social activists, across racial lines – focusing on the lived experience of the dispossessed. The failure of the First Inquiry “to recognise fully the humanity of black Africans” was acknowledged at the Conference in 1984 by CCNY President, David Hamburg who had succeeded Pifer.

The Inquiry's 483 reports were distilled into a book *Uprooting poverty: the South African challenge* (Wilson and Ramphele 1989). The Conference uncovered multiple depictions and analyses of poverty in South Africa, arguing how it could be mitigated and equality achieved. The Investigation found that far more black South Africans suffered greater intensities of poverty than the smaller number of Afrikaners who had been the subject of the first Inquiry (*A century of philanthropy* 2008: 15), and it explored the role of apartheid in the phenomenon (*Uprooting poverty* 1988). The book was used by policy makers of the 1990s in preparation for the first democratic South Africa which was ushered in twenty years ago on 27 April 1994, the date of the first democratic election. In spite of libraries' not being covered in any of the 483 papers, a paragraph on their value in enriching education and cultural lives of the dispossessed was included in the book, *Uprooting poverty* following a discussion with Francis Wilson and submission of a Conference paper by the author of this paper. Wilson and Ramphele note their findings:

Despite strong efforts manifest in such in such developments as the Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal ... we find that in the 1980s when the vast majority of those who are poor are black, library facilities are primarily available only to whites (Wilson and Ramphele, 1989: 296).

While the government responded to the Second Inquiry with hostility in marked contrast to its enthusiastic collaboration in the First Inquiry, its import and significance was met with indifference by the LIS community whose leadership launched its investigation into how libraries might promote development resulting in the report, *The use and development of South African library and information services* (1988) in 1986. The investigators, commissioned by the professional organisation The South African Institute for Libraries and Information Science (SAILIS) did not explore either the historical legacy of the First Inquiry, nor the contemporary significance of the Second Inquiry. Their investigation was undertaken at a time when even the LIS sector was recognising the need for change being driven by socio-political movements. In 1985 the *SAILIS Newsletter* published a piece entitled “Libraries must adapt to societal changes”. Two years later the theme of the annual professional conference was *Planning for Change: the Challenge to the Library and Information Profession* reflecting a nascent political consciousness of and planned response

to imminent change (Nassimbeni 1988: 163) instead of the leadership's habitual emphasis on technicism (Merrett, 1988: 1) and neutrality as the motive forces in the profession.

### **CCNY's Revitalisation of African Public Libraries, 2002 – 2012**

Once it assumed power, the first democratic government had many pressing issues of redress to deal with, and public libraries did not enjoy much attention at all, leading to a deterioration in service levels. The new professional association, LIASA, submitted a report to Parliament concluding that budget cuts were crippling libraries (Lor 1998), one of the many expressions of gathering concern about the neglected potential of public libraries in nation building. The CCNY African Libraries Program grew out of a meeting in May 2000 of librarians and experts from Africa concerned about underfunding and under-utilisation of public libraries in Africa. One of the major concerns to emerge from the meeting was the importance of sustainability; that donor funding should leverage material and other kind of support from governments of the beneficiary countries (*Revitalizing African libraries: the challenge of a quiet crisis*. 2000).

As a result CCNY undertook a programme in 2002 to revitalise public libraries in South Africa and other African countries (Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana and Nigeria). This led to model public libraries being created in the metros of Johannesburg, Cape Town Pretoria and Pietermaritzburg (*A century of philanthropy* 2008: 27). This investment served to leverage significant support from Government which launched a revitalisation programme in 2006, which is still ongoing, making good the neglect the libraries had suffered in the 1990s. The Carnegie programme later restricted its involvement to South Africa, with the CCNY citing the advantage of South Africa's long history with Carnegie, and the argument that there was an already strong platform existed there on which to build strong centres of (*Carnegie libraries in South Africa*, 2012). The projects, worth more than \$35 million were due to be completed in 2012.

As a companion to the building of excellence in public libraries, the CCNY has made an additional investment in education and training for public librarianship through its Next Generation Public Librarian Scholarship Programme. The programme aims to sponsor the professional qualification of 400 public librarians in its three-year tenure (*LIASA Annual Report 2011-2012*. 2012)

### **Reflections on regularities, singularities and South African exceptionalism**

An examination of this history has been viewed through the prism of the Carnegie philosophy, uncovering resonances between the developments spanning almost a century, and highlighting continuities and disruptions. The grants to public libraries in South Africa moved from an initial investment in buildings (1908 – 1923) to an associated concern for the building of a strong profession, and promoting its education and training (1928 – 2012). In an investigation into South African museums, parallel to that of libraries, the report published in 1928 recommended the establishment of a museums association in South Africa to advance knowledge and professionalism (Grobler and Pretorius 2008: 44). The museum sector did not adopt one of the options recommended by CCNY – becoming a section of the new South African library association - choosing rather to model itself on the British Museum Association. It is tantalising to imagine how different the consequences might have been for both these professions had the museologists followed the path of partnership with the librarians; today there is little interaction between these two sectors both concerned with memory institutions.

All the interventions examined here were based on Carnegie's espousal idea of "scientific philanthropy" (Bell, 2000: 484), a concern for the creation and dissemination of new knowledge and a belief in scientific inquiry. The plans for the libraries during the entire period were crafted drawing on expert input and careful investigation. The Corporation's agreement in the 1930s to the development of library services for whites was in line with their liberal stance at the time which was based on the belief that the strengthening of institutions would also be of benefit to black South Africans (Murphy, 1976: 21).

Although they differed in scope, there is common ground, too, between First and Second Inquiries in the appeals by the chief protagonists to objective and scientific investigation. One of the leading figures and authors of one of the reports of the First Inquiry declared: "The ultimate justification of social research is a belief in the potency of facts" (Malherbe, 1939: 38). Francis Wilson, leader of the Second Inquiry noted that it would be independent of government and any other kind of interference, and that it would collect and collate "facts" on poverty (Bell, 2000: 497).

In decades after the 1930s the CCNY recognised the negative impact of the 1928 Commission and made efforts to mitigate the exclusionary effects through later programmes (*A century of philanthropy* 2008). In spite of the mistakes made, Carnegie's impact on public libraries in South Africa has been very significant and lasting, linked to the shaping of policy and the creation of a strong system that is expanding and growing to serve all the nation's citizens.

My interest in exploring the possible influence of South African exceptionalism was prompted by the naming of the 1928 Commission to include Rhodesia and Kenya Colony, and the fact that the major thrust of development following the Commission was focused in South Africa in the 1930s, evident also in later decades. The CCNY's interest in South Africa is strongly evident also in the Poverty Inquiries. Space does not permit an examination of the convergence of factors that forged the historical links between South Africa and the CCNY that were renewed in the 1980s and in the new democracy. I suggest that this is a fruitful line of inquiry for a more detailed study in a field that is rich for further exploration by researchers interested in the struggle for libraries in South Africa, and the roles of the organised profession, activists, the state and enlightened philanthropy.

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