Pullman's patronizing nonsense [1]

Written by Anton Howes [2] | Tuesday 8 February 2011

Philip Pullman and other celebrated authors are taking part in a <u>nation-wide protest</u> [3] against library closures. He has suggested that the idea of volunteers taking over the running of libraries is "patronising nonsense". However, the size and scope of the protests suggests otherwise, indicating that there is energy and passion already firmly devoted to libraries.

History suggests otherwise too. Hoping to replace Britain's growing drinking culture (patronising much?!), the Public Libraries Act of 1850 allowed local authorities to build and finance libraries. However, they still relied on individuals for their survival and upkeep, ranging from volunteers donating their time and effort, to stupendously wealthy donors such as Andrew Carnegie and Henry Tate buying them vast collections of books. Often these donors founded their own free libraries. Carnegie alone funded over 3,000 worldwide, with 380 in Britain, whilst after half a century of the Public Libraries Act, there were only 295 government-run libraries by 1900.

In fact, instead of creating all of those 295 libraries, the 1850 Act led to the decline or public acquisition of existing free institutions, particularly the Mechanics' Institutes. Again, these relied on the actions of volunteers and philanthropists, along with wealthy industrialists needing an educated labour-force to recruit from. These institutions served not only as libraries but as lecture theatres, museums and centres of learning, expanding from just a few in 1823 to over 700 by the time of the 1850 Act. Those that survived public acquisition or decline evolved into universities, most notably Birkbeck College.

This public take-over indicates one of the problems of government provision. After all, why should a Carnegie bother funding a library if the state already promises to do so using his tax money? When free of this, it was up to the limitless imagination and drive of individuals to provide library services. Instead, Philip Pullman and others now have to petition government to allocate funds in competition with endless other forms of local authority expenditure.

So, Mr Pullman, if a less prosperous Britain in the early 19th Century could afford to voluntarily lay the foundations for existing libraries and universities, why shouldn't we now? Isn't government provision of these services the true "patronising nonsense"?

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- [4] http://uklibertyleague.org/
- [5] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
- [6] http://disqus.com