

Melvil Dewey: A Singular and Contentious Life

by Anna Elliott

Melvil Dewey originated one of the most efficient arrangements of library books ever devised. He also founded the famous Lake Placid Club in New York State, organized the American Metric Bureau, and advocated a streamlined system of phonetic spelling.

For efficiency, he carried five fountain pens, each with a different color of ink, and made a daily compact with his wife not to waste a single minute. He was loved and hated, lauded and ridiculed—an enigma to his friends and enemies.

R for "Reformer"

As a child, Melville Louis Kossuth Dewey preferred self-improvement activities to what he referred to as "silly games." He inventoried his mother's pantry and, without her permission, proceeded to rearrange it. While still in his teens, he made a thorough analysis of his father's store, proved its business inefficiencies and made arrangements for the transfer of its inventory to its competitor down the street. Apparently, Joel Dewey accepted his son's criticism—he closed the store.

Before graduating from high school, young Dewey electrified his classmates with an impassioned speech on the evils of wasting time and bought cuff links for himself inscribed with the letter R, which he explained was the initial for "Reformer."

When he left home, he immediately shortened his name from Melville to Melvil Dewey. Some years later he attempted what he considered to be a more efficient spelling of his last name—Dui—but reluctantly admitted defeat when his bank refused to honor this signature.

Melvil Dewey has been variously described as a rampaging prohibitionist, a segregationist, a revolutionary, a Christian bigot, and a genius. He was born in the hard-bitten country of Adams Center, New York, on December 10, 1851, where survival was the goal and adherence to the basic codes of industry, frugality, and self-reliance were the guideposts. What-

ever the odds, he held fast to these rules of the game throughout his lifetime.

Not only did he shun tobacco and refuse alcohol, he tried to convert everyone else to his standards. While at Alfred University, he proved mathematically that anyone smoking one cigar a day for fifty years would burn up \$15,000. Although frugal, he was not interested in money and stated so in his will: "Beyond provision for health and comfort, money is of value only as it can be used for doing good."

Colleagues described Dewey as enthusiastic, brash, and calculating, but they acknowledged that his stubbornness was as useful as it was exasperating. During the various pursuits of his lifetime, he inspired intense and lasting loyalties and made increasingly numerous enemies. He had a driving energy and worked with determination and persistence. Compelled by his passion for efficiency and economy, he had an unshakable confidence in his own judgment. He was accused of being so preoccupied with his own overpowering mission that he tended to overlook everyone else's identity. As one critic said, "He was often wrong, but never in doubt."

A grandiose scheme

Despite the fact that Melvil Dewey was perhaps his own worst enemy, his list of accomplishments is amazingly long.

Shortly after entering Alfred University, he transferred to Amherst College because it offered an outstanding physical education program. However, horseback riding was the only sport he undertook, because according to Dewey it was a timesaving means of transportation.

But he found other satisfactions at Amherst. He discovered ineptness and inefficiency in the library and immediately obtained part-time employment in that department.

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In that era library books often were housed according to a numbering system that indicated the floor, aisle, section, and shelf on which they were stored. Whenever rearrangement was necessary, all of the books had to be reclassified. Perceiving the amount of time wasted not only in finding books when they were needed but in their necessary and frequent reclassification, Dewey was determined to devise a simple, workable, and permanent classification system.

While attending a chapel service at Amherst, he suddenly conceived the idea of using a system of Arabic numerals with decimals for book classification. The scope of the plan put all printed human knowledge into the ten classifications of a numerical system ranging from 000 to 900 and made use of as many decimals within each group as were needed to define adequately the content of the book being classified.

Excitedly, Dewey presented his plan to interested librarians and professors at Amherst on May 8, 1873. They not only welcomed his concept with enthusiasm but offered to help him with the necessary and overwhelming task of dividing the entirety of man's knowledge into ten categories.

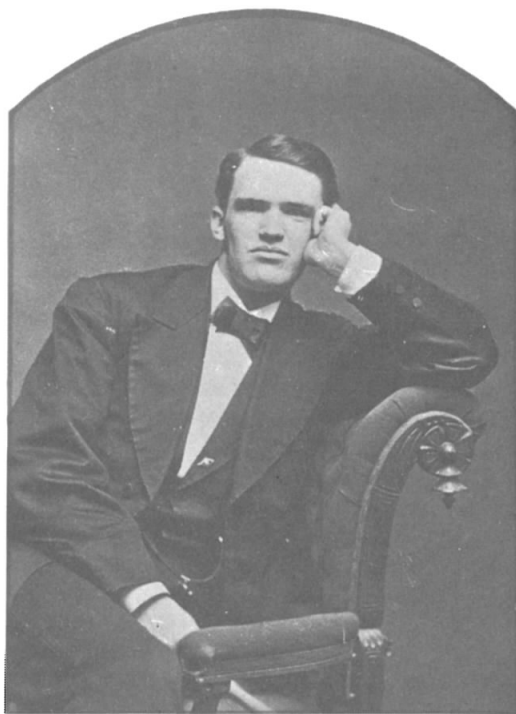
Although the grandiose plan belonged unquestionably to Melvil Dewey, his fellow student and loyal friend, Walter Stanley Biscoe, worked diligently and precisely behind the scenes, completing the many details necessary for the first amplification of the project.

Within three years *A Classification and Subject Index For Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library* was a published reality. It was widely adopted in the United States and England as well as elsewhere in the world despite criticism by proponents of rival systems.

Later, Dewey went abroad to discuss his system and was instrumental in founding the Library Association of the United Kingdom. The French Institut International de Bibliographie received permission to extend the Dewey system in a way that made it available for literature in a *Manuel de la Classification*.

Developing the profession

On the strength of his monumental achievement, Dewey was asked to become acting li-

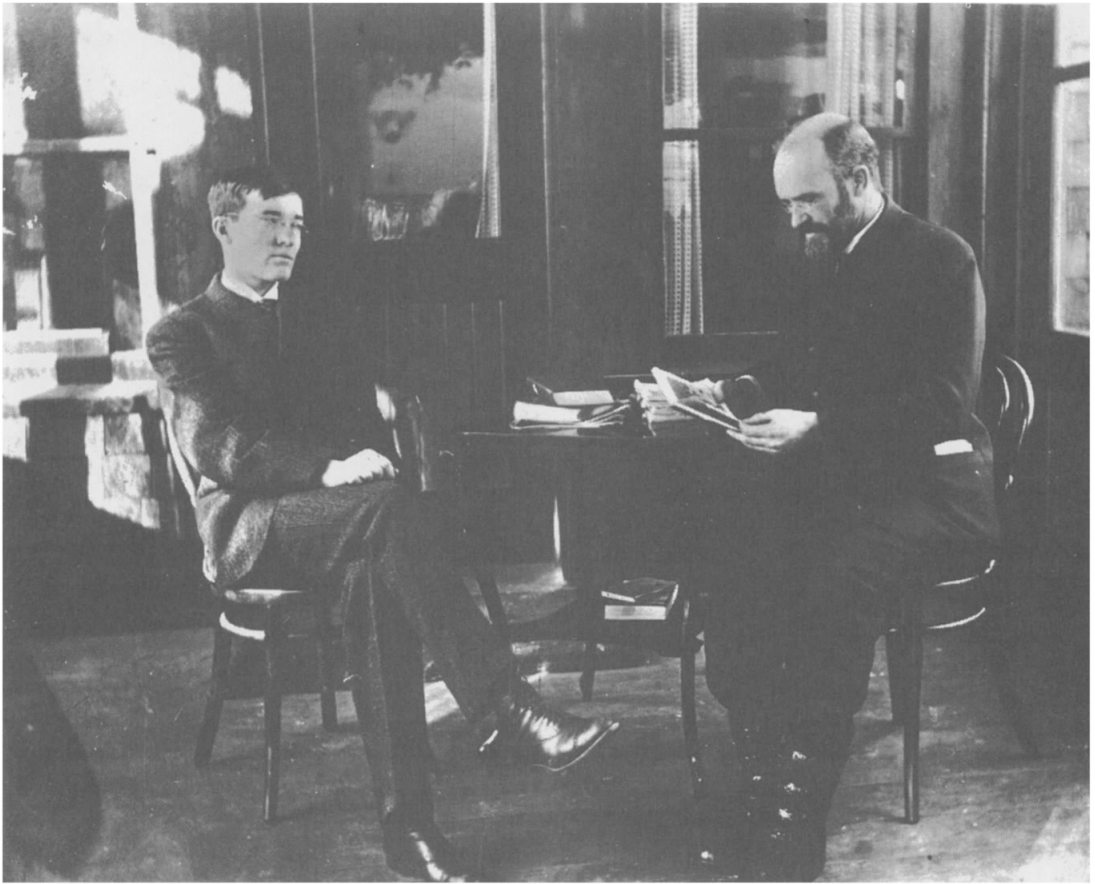


The young reformer, in an early studio pose

brarian at Amherst after his graduation from that institution. He accepted but two years later left the position to become editor of the newly conceived *Library Journal*. In its first issue, his still-quoted article entitled "The Profession" appeared. The contents of that brief essay are as true of librarianship today as when they were first published in 1876. The final paragraph is worth remembering:

The time was when a library was very like a museum, and a librarian was a mouser in musty books, and visitors looked with curious eyes at ancient tomes and manuscripts. The time is when a library is a school, and the librarian is in the highest sense a teacher, and the visitor is a reader among the books as a workman among his tools.

With his usual energy, Melvil Dewey strongly advocated the organization of librarians as essential for furthering the profession. Although such a movement was started two years after Dewey's birth by Charles C. Jewett, Smithsonian Institution librarian, and Charles E. Norton, publisher and bookseller, the goal was



Dewey with his only son, Godfrey (left)

not reached until the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. At that time the American Library Association came into being "to promote the library interests of the country."

Dewey attended the event, as did Annie Godfrey, the librarian at Wellesley College. The single-purposed, businesslike Mr. Dewey did not surprise those of his acquaintance who recognized him as a ladies' man when he later married this young woman. Their son, Godfrey, had the distinction of being the first child born to parents both of whom were ALA members. He was given a silver baby mug by the organization, inscribed to him as "ALA Dewey," showing his birthdate as September 3, 1887.

The first library school

In 1883 additional recognition came to Melvil Dewey. He was asked to become librarian at

Columbia University and to make real another of his dreams—the establishment of a library school. It was the first institution to be created specifically for the instruction of librarians. His curriculum was pragmatic and based on the routine of a working librarian, involving typical activities both technical and clerical.

Although the library school concept had been part of the agreement that took Dewey to Columbia, he was astounded to find upon arrival that neither funds nor classrooms had been provided. Typically undeterred he personally enrolled each student and somehow found time to clean and furnish a storeroom above the chapel in which to conduct classes.

Of the twenty-six students in Columbia's first library class, nineteen were women, not surprising except for the fact that admittance of women to the university was expressly forbid-



Melvil and Annie Dewey, his first wife

den. Since Dewey was firmly convinced that women were destined to become librarians and that his goal was to help them to achieve this destiny, he simply ignored the rules. And he seemed oblivious to the fact that his endeavor was further frowned upon because his enrollment questionnaire, which obviously had not been screened by higher authorities, required information as to the applicant's weight, height, and color of hair and eyes, as well as the suggestion that a photograph be included.

Nevertheless, the library school at Columbia University flourished. Under the guidance and practical approach of its founder, all books in the university library were quickly reclassified and recataloged. Among other innovations, the first library reading room was established. In addition to the usual classes in library techniques conducted for all entering freshmen, the

library school began to offer intensive courses in other pertinent subjects ranging from book buying to literary methods.

Disregarding its success and ignoring a waiting list of applicants, the trustees finally ordered the library school closed as the only means of coping with Dewey's high-handed methods of getting his own way. The school's founder must have derived considerable satisfaction from the knowledge that the Columbia Library School became a widely copied model and that the resulting library reforms both furthered the profession and benefitted library patrons.

In 1883 Dewey accepted an invitation to become director of the New York State Library. He took his library school concept with him and in Albany established the New York State Library School. As might have been expected, this innovative gentleman almost im-



Dewey in later years, at Lake Placid Club

mediately completely reorganized the New York State Library, converting it into one of the most efficient state systems at that time. He also developed a system of traveling libraries and moveable picture collections that extended and revolutionized existing library practices.

Scandal at Lake Placid

During the seventeen years that he was employed by the State of New York, Dewey moved toward the realization of another dream—the development at Lake Placid, New York, of a large vacation resort operating as a private club.

Against the backdrop of the Adirondack Mountains, Dewey endeavored to see that Americans learned what they needed to know about winter sports. He did not participate but was frequently photographed in a bearskin

coat with ski poles in hand. He developed a winter sports program that earned the Club the reputation of being the St. Moritz of America. People who had never before seen skis learned to use them at Lake Placid. And in 1932, Lake Placid was the site of the International Winter Olympics.

But ultimately Dewey created a greater hazard for his own future and for that of his project than any to be found on the ski slopes or along the bobsled runs.

“No one will be received as a member or guest,” he announced, “against whom there is physical, moral, social or race objection.”

In making such a statement, he did not consider the fact that many tuberculosis sanitariums were clustered around Saranac Lake, only twenty miles to the west of Lake Placid. The patients and their visitors might very well want to become guests or even members of the Club, regardless of their physical afflictions.

Since his own code so rigidly eliminated the use of tobacco and alcohol, he did not foresee any difficulty in enforcing such moral prohibitions on others.

But his adamant racial prejudice was the real bombshell. It automatically banned Jews from membership or as guests of the Lake Placid Club in New York State, which was the home of many prestigious and articulate Jewish people. Although Dewey apparently saw no problem, his fellow members of the New York State Board of Regents were troubled by his announcement.

Unable to overlook the potential effect of his statement, yet hesitating to make a direct attack on Dewey’s racism, they searched for another error with which to charge him as an undesirable member of the Board. They chose malfeasance, suggesting that the book Dewey had authored on library classification had been made a required text in the library school in order to augment his own income from the resulting increase in sales.

Even though Dewey proved he was supplying the book free of charge and retaliated further with the fact that he and his assistants often taught in the school without compensation, members of the Board of Regents decided reluctantly, according to the minutes of that meeting, that they must remove him from his position.

However, before they could take action, Melvil Dewey yielded to the pressure and resigned. In effect this proved to be his resignation from the professional world of librarianship in which he had functioned so dynamically for many years. Thereafter, he devoted himself almost wholeheartedly to the Lake Placid Club and to a sister project in Florida.

An uncompromising individualist

Melvil Dewey was often referred to as a genius. Indeed, his imagination did allow him to visualize possibilities that others could not see. Academically, he was only a mediocre student at Amherst, but an earlier teacher remembered him as a student who could complete an arithmetic problem more quickly in his head than others in the class could accomplish on paper.

His contemporaries assessed him as kind, generous, and honest. While a teacher at Bernhard's Bay, New York, he bought books that would not otherwise have been provided for the students with no thought of being repaid. He taught shorthand for extended periods at Amherst without any reimbursement. He claimed nothing for himself from the immense increase in property values at Lake Placid during the development of that recreational area.

Despite his accomplishments as a professional librarian, Melvil Dewey was recognized primarily as an organizer, secondarily as an educator, and hardly at all as a book-loving person. Acquaintances could not recall his ever recommending or discussing a book.

Until his death in Florida on December 26, 1931, he continuously updated and improved the Dewey Decimal Classification and Relative Index, which is still periodically revised and published by Forest Press, Inc., Lake Placid Club, New York. Among other library-oriented endeavors, Melvil Dewey established The Library Bureau, an equipment manufacturer specializing in library supplies, which brought into being the card index, vertical file, and loose-leaf binder. Nearly as helpful as his book classification system was Dewey's standardization of catalog cards to a single size and use of uniform abbreviations. He also formulated a library employment service.

For his lifelong attempt at spelling reform, he faced ridicule and criticism, suffered loss

of time and money, and alienated friends, but he never once wavered or compromised.

While working for the State of New York, he was instrumental in furthering the adoption of important revisions of education laws favorably affecting the Board of Regents, on which he served as secretary. He was the director of New Home Education, a forerunner of what we now recognize as adult education.

At times he avoided the credit he deserved for his endeavors, preferring to work in the background on many projects and disappearing once the program was established and functioning smoothly. Yet on the final day of the conference that gave birth to the American Library Association, he was quick to put his signature in first place on the roster and to call attention to the fact that doing so made him the foremost member of the organization.

He need not have worried. Who else can claim so many achievements in such diversified areas? Melvil Dewey will not be forgotten. ☐

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