



IFLA
2005
OSLO

World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme:

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

June 14, 2005

Code Number:

126-E

Meeting:

102 Library History

The library of Molde labour association 1910

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Molde labour association (MLA) was founded in 1861 as a philanthropic movement. The association's main purposes were to spread Christianity, enlighten its members and lift their moral standard (early on, women were not allowed to join the association). Another important role for the association was to provide economical assistance for its poor members. The poorest workers could not afford to join the association. It was not a tradeunion in any sense, rather the opposite. The leadership in MLA were primarily civil servants and merchants. They had a conservative social stance, which included the fear of socialism, a movement that had increased popularity in Norway around 1900. The town of Molde is located on the western coast of Norway. In 1910 the town had a population of 2145 citizens. It was, and is known, as administrative centre in the region.



Ole Berg, leader of Molde labour

association in 1910.

The quest for social reforms from dissatisfied workers in Molde should be prevented by the enlightenment MLA provided, and from different institutions that provided self-support. In the 1880's the MLA rejected an invitation from Kristiania (Oslo) labour association to take part in a nationwide union of labour associations in Norway. It is likely that the refusal was caused by the fear of the socialistic bias held by the leaders of Kristiania labour association.

The library was financed by subscription, presents from rich citizens in the city and support from the local trade.



A large selection of the books from the library of Molde labour association 1910 are today located in a special section of Molde public library.

In 1868, the small library found its first home in the home of one of the board members. This was also same year the association purchased the first books for lending. The number of volumes held in the library had by 1884 increased to 860, and in 1891 when the association

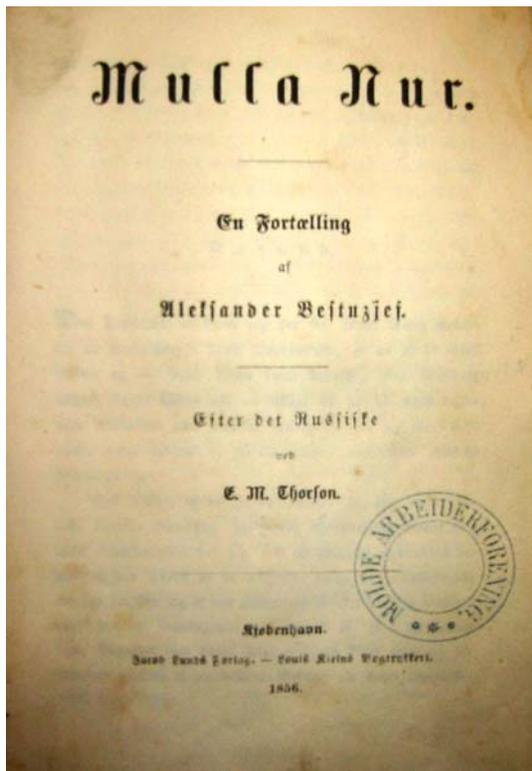
moved to their own building, the library contained about 900 volumes. In the beginning the association invested in two collections of used books. It purchased a collection from a private club and the books from a lending library in the city. As the years went by, they also filled the bookshelves in MLA library with new (not used) books. In 1910 the library included approximately 2000 books¹ and journals. It can also be noted that the association allowed non-members to use their library.

The focus of my study is their catalogue from 1910. I registered a number of books and periodicals, representative of the literary structure in the catalogue. This is divided into groups and examined closely. The purpose of my study is to answer the questions: What criteria was used to select books and periodicals for the library's collection? Was the library just for the reader's amusement, or was it an instrument for enlightenment of the members, as well as a buffer (provided by the board) against socialism? By offering the lenders selected literature, was a specific bias promoted towards certain views on events and changes in society (reforms)? And finally, did the association (by providing this literature) attempt to strengthen the readers moral behaviour?

My primary finding during the study is that the library worked as a tool for enlightenment as well as an instrument for social control.² In that thesis is included the paternal spirit that ruled in Molde from the middle of the 1700 century and to the year 1910. This spirit includes the bourgeois and the workers in Molde, the latter were guided by the upper classes in the small town. The common library user (member) in the town was provided proper and suitable information. It provided the bias the board of MLA wished to promote. The literature provided educated the members, was sceptical to socialism and influenced the workers morals, especially to keep away from alcohol and be devout Christians.

¹ The collection of books in the workers library of the Swedish town Halmstad in 1910, contained 2403 volumes. This association was a gathering of trade union movements. The study from Sweden is carried out by Magnus Torstensson 1994, p. 107.

² "[e]mployers and library reformers hoped that by providing suitable literature, and by encouraging the reading habit, they could soften social tension. Working-class readers, it was hoped, could be weaned away from drink and from dangerous literature with tendencies towards socialism...", see Martyn Lyons (1999): "New Readers in the Nineteenth Century : Women, Children, Workers" in *A History of Reading in the West*, p. 313-345.



The novel *Mulla Nur* (1856, Copenhagen) from the Russian writer

Aleksànder Bestuzhev was a part of the collection of books

in the library of Molde labour association. Notice the emblem

of the association on the right hand side of the title page.

The library also had a relatively broad collection of literature that fitted the needs for the upper echelon in the labour association. In addition to writers from Norway and other Scandinavian countries, the library contained books by authors like Aristophanes, Dostojevski, Turgenjev, Hugo, Zola, Verne, Sue, Sand, Dumas, de Maupassant, Auerbach, Heyse, Twain, Poe, Fenimore Cooper, Blecher Stowe, Scott, Dickens, Marryat, Conan Doyle, Thackeray, Defoe, Swift, Lord Byron and Sienkiewics, and the collection of course also contained journals and magazines (mostly from Denmark). That the following writers were absent in the bookshelves at the library of Molde labour association in 1910: e.g. Tolstoi, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Stevenson, should also be noted

It is not surprising, that most of the books in the collection were fiction, but there was also a varied selection of educational books and periodicals. This segment of the collection was proportionally larger than in other libraries at the same time. With that in mind, we can establish that enlightenment of the masses, was one important (motivation) purpose for this philanthropy in Molde. My finding is that the literature selection in the library with purpose to educate the members first of all was concerned with Norwegian history and several topics in natural science (agriculture, health). Books with religious topics were unexpectedly few: three of them were books about the German church reformationist Martin Luther, all written by the Dane Andreas Listow.

Despite two fires in 1916 and during World War Two (1941), that consumed most of the town, a majority of the books that were in the library in 1910 survived, and are today located in a special section of Molde public library.

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