Emily Wheelock Reed: Courage Under Fire

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, the United States’ promise of freedom and democracy exclude those at the margins of the society. African-Americans and other people of color were denied their basic rights, including access to reading, libraries, and education. Consequently, white librarians at this period were faced with a difficult dilemma. They were ingrained in a racist society, but had to carry a professional code of ethics that required them to promote intellectual freedom and access to information. The segregated libraries and ban on materials promoting racial integration were at odds with their professional and moral responsibilities. However, despite the danger of attacks and violence, a few white librarians publicly lauded the Civil Rights Movement. Some courageously upheld the Library Bill of Rights, particularly the libraries’ role on “providing materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues.”

Emily Wheelock Reed, Alabama’s director of Library Services during the Civil Rights Movement was one of them. In spite of the initial lack of community support including the American Library Association, she courageously defied the demands of an influential segregationist Alabama Senator to remove a book on integration out of

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circulation. She is a significant figure in library history in the United States because she was steadfast in her resolve to uphold the librarianship’s code of ethics. She also broke the stereotype at that period that librarians do not engage in activism.

Reed was born in Asheville, North Carolina. Although she only spent a year in Asheville, the Alabama State Library Board insisted on representing her as a native Southerner. In fact, she sees herself more of a Midwesterner. She completed her degree from Indiana University where she was invited to join the Phi Beta Kappa. Reed received her library degree cum laude at Michigan where she was also offered a position. She then worked at Florida State University, the Detroit Public Library, a public library on Kauai, Hawaii, and for the state library agency in Louisiana before assuming the directorship of the Alabama Public Library Service Division in 1957.

Reed was steadfast in her resolve to uphold the libraries’ code of ethics. She never intended to cause controversy on May of 1959. As Alabama’s Library Services director, she authorized the circulation of Garth William’s book, The Rabbits’ Wedding, a children’s book that tells a tale of two long time male and female rabbits getting married. The story itself was not controversial. However, the illustration of a marriage ceremony of a black male rabbit and white rabbit riled up some of the South’s most influential segregationists. They interpreted the story as promoting miscegenation. Henry Balch of the Orlando Sentinel wrote, “As soon as you pick up the book, you realize these rabbits

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
are integrated.” Balch suggested that the book was an “attempt to brainwash white children.” The Home News, Montgomery Alabama’s organ of its local White Citizen’s Council declared that the “rabbit book was a subtle lesson on miscegenation.”

Founded in the fifties, the White Citizen’s Council movement was a United States movement against racial desegregation. However, Alabama’s Marengo County Senator E.O. “Big Ed” Eddins became Reed’s staunchest opponent. Eddins was a strong supporter of library development prior to the Civil Rights Movement. He was instrumental in the establishment of public libraries in the South. He co-sponsored the first state appropriation for public libraries and worked “towards adequate spending for library services.” Despite his pioneering work in the establishment and funding of public libraries in the South, by the mid-1950’s, he was known more for his strong position on race. He even “introduced a resolution seeking federal funds to fund the mass resettlement of black Alabamians in the North and the West.”

Reed appeared twice before Eddins at the state Senate’s Taxation Committee and a meeting with the Senate Finance Committee. On both occasions, Eddins questioned Reed on the existence of books “dealing with segregation and communism.” Eddins particularly targeted Reed for allowing the circulation of the book, the Rabbits’ Wedding, in Alabama libraries. He went as far as pose for a newspaper reporter with the book in his hands declaring, “This book and many others should be taken off the shelves and

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9 Patterson Toby Graham. A Right To Read, 104.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 105
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 106
burned.” Despite the strong racist sentiment in Alabama, many disapproved of his position on the book. Some were embarrassed at the manner he conducted himself and believed that the book was harmless. Others, particularly the senators, did not publicly oppose Eddins for fear of being called “pro-integrationist.”

Reed, on the other hand, refused to remove the book off the shelf. When her library bought the *Rabbits’ Wedding*, a cataloger had warned her of the trouble it may cause. However, at the time, Reed did not see anything controversial about the book. She simply thought that children will enjoy reading it. It was an innocent decision and by no means a political one. Nevertheless, when Eddins began to pressure her to remove the book, she refused to comply because “she felt a sense of responsibility to defend it against censorship.” Moreover, she argued that “even if the book could be construed as pro-integration, the library agency had the responsibility to provide information on all sides of a question.” Reed also noted that the library also carry books espousing racial separation.

Reed also broke the stereotype at that period that librarians do not engage in activism. She saw the moral issue of the situation and decided to stand up to her beliefs. Despite the danger of being attacked and harassed in a generally pro-segregation region, she continued to fight against censorship. Her persistence won her favor in some circles of the community. As a result, regardless of Eddins’ tireless work to gather support from segregationists to depose her from her job, she was still able to remain the director.

\[^{16}\text{Ibid.,107}\]
\[^{17}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{18}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{19}\text{Ibid.}\]
of the Alabama Library Services until her resignation in 1960. Importantly, her actions allowed other supporters to come out of the woodwork. Eddins and the Segregation Screening Committee “backed away from their insistence on Reed’s immediate removal” from the pressure “being applied by the librarians and library-minded citizens in the state.”

Reed is significant in the history of Library Science because she remained dedicated and faithful to her moral belief which also aligns with the Library Bill of Rights. She was also brave and courageous in resisting the demands of an influential and powerful Alabama senator at a period in American History when opposition to the status quo could mean death and harassment. Her resistance also allowed for other supporters to speak up against the banality of racism.

Emily Reed is a great example of what a librarian should be. History tells us that our freedom and right to access information will always be threatened by powers that be. Finally, Emily serves as a model for the new generation of librarians faced with difficult and moral decisions. This is particularly important in this period in the United States where our current administration uses fear to rob us of our rights and freedom of privacy and access to information.

Patterson Toby Graham, author of A Right To Read laments that the struggles of Southern Blacks has been neglected in the American library history. I am tempted to say the same thing. I used the internet to jump start my research. I wanted to find a librarian who served as a leader in a social movement in American history. However, I had a hard time finding much about Emily Reed and other significant librarians during the Civil Rights Movement. Graham’s A Right to Read, covers much of my information on this.
paper. I checked his sources and most came from personal interviews and news clippings. I found two other journals mentioning Reed, but again their sources point towards Graham. In fact, Graham’s work on Reed prompted the Freedom to Read Foundation as well as the American Library Association executive council to honor her courageous work in 1959. I also read the American Library Association’s resolution from the ALA website for background information as well as AJ Wright’s review of A Right to Read published by Alabama Review.
References


