

Katharine L. Sharp

(*An Appreciation*)

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**Read at the annual meeting of
the Illinois Library Association,
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"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance;
And there is pansies, that's for thoughts."

When your president came to me one day in the early summer and asked me to tell the librarians of Illinois something of what I know of the work of Miss Sharp, I hesitated to undertake the commission; I knew it would be a hard thing to do at all, an impossible thing to do well, for Katharine Sharp was my friend, and it is not an easy thing to speak fluently and readily of one's friends. God gives to each of us only a few and their remembrance is a very sacred thing.

On the first day of last June, returning to the University from the Conference of the American Library Association at Washington, we were stunned to receive a message telling of the fatal injury to the woman who had been our former chief, followed a few hours later by one which told us that she had gone forth into the great Mystery. "If the life that has gone out has been like music, full of concords, full of sweetness, richness, delicacy, truth—then there are two ways to look at it: one is to say, 'I have not lost it', another to say, 'Blessed be God that I have had it so long.'"

It is fitting that we should on this occasion of the annual meeting of the Illinois Library Association suspend for a little time our more formal and regular business to do honor to the memory of Katharine Sharp because she was in every sense an *Illinois* librarian. *Here* was done practically all of her professional work; *here* she founded the School which will be perhaps her most enduring monument; it was the history of your libraries for which "she lived laborious days and nights."

Born in Elgin, May 21, 1865, of an ancestry of Illinois pioneers the Sharps coming from Central New York, and the Thompsons (her maternal ancestors) from Connecticut, Miss

Sharp may be called a typical Illinois woman. Her college preparatory work was done at Elgin Academy of which in 1881, she was a graduate, and to which, four years later, she returned as a teacher. It was during her college days at Northwestern that I came to know her. In college she was a leader, showing early in her college life, even in her freshman days, her exceptional administrative abilities. As a student her work was excellent, well-balanced, intelligent, perhaps not brilliant, and it received, later, some years after graduation, the stamp of Phi Beta Kappa. Her class, her sorority chapter, her literary society—all recognized the qualities of leadership which were hers. Katharine Sharp was always very intensely alive! One could not be long in a room with her without feeling her compelling personality.

After leaving college she returned, as has been stated, to Elgin Academy as a member of its teaching force. Here follow two rather unhappy years. Strange to those who knew her later as a teacher in the Library School, Miss Sharp did not like to teach! Just exactly her reason, I confess I have never quite fathomed, but I more than suspect that it was the discipline incident to high school life which troubled her. Her standards of life and of conduct were held so high for herself that it is quite possible in her youthful experience before she had gained the charity that comes with maturity, she had difficulty in learning how to overlook with discretion.

In 1888, Miss Sharp was appointed assistant librarian of Scoville Institute, now the Oak Park public library, and here she began what proved to be her vocation. Although called "*assistant* librarian," she was in fact the only librarian in the little library, the titular librarian being a Chicago business man, who had accepted his honorary office at the request of the founder of the Institute, and who in actual practice left the management of the infant library almost wholly to the judgment of the assistant librarian. Miss Sharp felt always an especial fondness for the library in which she made her start, though she never took seriously her own connection with it.

Two years at Oak Park were enough to convince her that in librarianship lay her best field for work, and to prove that she could no longer be satisfied to blunder along at random, for she had learned that accurate, intelligent, and systematic library administration comes neither by the gift of God nor through blind chance. Fortunately, about this time, the existence of the New York State Library School was brought to her notice with the result that in October of 1890, she cast in her lot permanently with library workers.

About the time when plans were under way for preparing and installing the Comparative Library Exhibit at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, as a feature of the Federal exhibit, Miss Sharp finished her work at the New York State Library School and was placed in charge of the collection. This brought her prominently to the attention of Chicago educators, the result being her appointment as Director of the Department of Library Science opened that fall at Armour Institute of Technology. It was in this relation that many of our prominent Illinois library workers first knew Miss Sharp. Her ambition from the first day she took charge at Armour was to make her department equal to any Library School in the country, and to that end she spared neither herself, her colleagues, nor her students. The School at Armour Institute which had been started as a one-year course, with entrance examinations based on high school work, was soon advanced to a two-years' course. In 1897, the connection with Armour was terminated, the University of Illinois taking over the School of Library Science, with its equipment. The Director of the School added to her special duties those of University Librarian, the requirements were advanced to two years of college work, and the degree of Bachelor of Library Science (B. L. S.) was conferred by the University upon the completion of the course. Later she was successful in adding a third year of college work to the entrance requirements.

In this connection it is of interest to note that when Miss Sharp left Armour Institute she had to choose between calls

from two great state universities, Illinois and her neighbor on the north. I asked her once why she chose as she did, and her answer I think brings out one phase of her character. At Wisconsin, the University librarianship would not have been hers, and she distrusted her ability to administer smoothly and without friction a library school which would be in the position constantly of asking favors from another body of people, namely the University librarian and his staff. Those who knew Katharine Sharp most intimately, will probably agree that she made a wise decision. It is not given to *small* souls to recognize and distrust their own weaknesses. If this trait of demanding for one's work an undivided leadership be a weakness, it lies nevertheless at the base of most successful undertakings. In Miss Sharp's own case, it gave her many unhappy hours, but she never questioned her right to make her own decisions and to carry them through to their logical end.

During the ten years which she spent at the University, which marked the close of her residence in the state, many and varied experiences and responsibilities came to Katharine Sharp, and some keen sorrows. Two or three times she refused the directorship of other library schools. Those who had the privilege of working with her must have noticed as the years passed, added to the dignity, poise and strength that were always hers, a depth of feeling, a breadth of outlook, and a sweetness of nature which had not always been there. It was towards the end of this period that she suffered a double bereavement in the death, only a few months apart, of her father and brother. The latter loss is largely responsible, not for her final decision to give up her work at the University, as her state of health would in any case have probably brought that about, but for changing completely the tenor of her life, since with Robert Sharp's death, the closest ties of kinship were broken, and she was left pitifully alone.

Shortly before Miss Sharp left Illinois she had begun serious work on her report on Illinois libraries, destined to

grow into a monograph of nearly 800 pages. Part one of this report was printed in 1906, and part five was issued from the University Press in 1908. No state has probably received so complete a treatment of its library history as Illinois in Miss Sharp's report, and whatever future volumes may be written, this report must always form the foundation.

Owing to the lack of a state library extension commission in Illinois for many years, Miss Sharp offered to allow the School of which she was the head, to serve as an informal bureau of information on library matters, thus placing herself and all her resources at the service of the citizens of this state. Indeed the work of this informal bureau was by no means restricted to the state of Illinois, as examination of the files of correspondence at the Library School Office will show. Miss Sharp was not only one of the original members of the organization before whom I have the honor to be speaking, but she served it as its President in 1903-04, and represented it on various important committees, especially in the oft repeated efforts to secure additional library legislation.

To enumerate all of Katharine Sharp's services to her state and to the library profession might tax unduly your patience and my strength, and I must pass over almost without mention her wider service to the national organization, stopping only to say that for ten years (1895-1905) she served on the Council of the American Library Association, and for two different years (1898 and 1907) as its vice-president.

When Miss Sharp left her work at the University of Illinois in 1907, she meant to retire only temporarily from the field of librarianship, but the break proved to be a permanent one, for the rest of her life, seven very busy years, was devoted to the interests of Lake Placid Club, New York State, of which she had long been a member, and whose second vice-president she had become. Though her duties in connection with Lake Placid Club had no direct relation to the library field, her interest in her profession never lagged. Any

honor or recognition which fell to the lot of her friends in the library world, she was quick to recognize and applaud. Though no longer *with* us, she was always *of* us.

For thirty-three years, through an entire generation, the writer of this sketch has been honored in being admitted to the friendship of Katharine Sharp. Unlike some of her friends, I think I never blindly worshipped at her shrine, refusing to see or admit her faults—for she had faults—but I admired her ability, I honored her courage, I trusted her sense of justice and always I was grateful for the privilege of working at her side. It is worth while to know a woman of whom it can be said, "What was to be borne, she bore, what was to be done she did, but she never made any fuss about either her doing or her suffering."

Mrs. Browning must have had in mind someone like Katharine Sharp when she wrote

"What are we set on earth for? Say, to toil—
Nor seek to leave thy tending of the vines,
For all the heat o' the day.
God did anoint thee with his odorous oil,
To wrestle, not to reign; and He assigns
All thy tears over, like pure crystallines,
For younger fellow workers of the soil
To wear for amulets."

Springfield, Illinois
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Frances Simpson