I did a little research on Jennie Flexner for another class but was limited in what I could present. This project was the perfect outlet for further exploration and a presentation befitting her life and contribution to the profession of librarianship. I had only an understanding of readers’ advisor from the modern execution of “I enjoyed Memoirs of a Geisha….could you recommend another I might like”? There seems to be a disconnect from that scenario to what I had discovered Miss Flexner to be known for. She wrote many articles, reviews, conducted studies and wrote several books in her life and I found her writing to be eloquent and succinct yet she seemed to have such a heart for the common man and human condition. Her work was really what we would term today as outreach.

So, in 2013, what could we learn from the mission of Miss Flexner’s outreach? Those in the librarian profession still desire to create an environment that is welcoming instead of daunting, regardless of the architecture of the building. The United States, though more than eighty years older than the time when Miss Flexner developed her readers advisory office at the NYPL, is not that different. Our economic fortunes wax and wane and by all accounts we are still in a period of recovery following an economic downturn in 2008. Many people are still looking to find the type of job they had then with the expected economic compensation. Are they finding the help they need at their local library? Today, I believe that Jennie Flexner would be standing on the steps of the NYPL, iPad in hand, helping the job seeker with the latest job postings that might be the perfect fit for that individual or showing them where they could obtain continuing
education classes. I hope that is happening now at libraries across the country.

The need for study was threefold in my estimation in simply to show what has been done successfully in the past in a myriad of circumstances, to show those circumstances are not so different than today and finally to celebrate a life dedicated to serving library patrons.

Her life spanned more than 60 years. During that time library history and world and U.S. history provided rich contexts in which to explore. The fact that she wrote much professionally and served on so many ALA committees over the years also provided much material to draw from. And while I learned so much about her character from what she wrote and from a few sentences here and there from what other people about her, I found little about her personally and no writing referring about anything other than books and those she helped.

My process was to read everything that I could that was written by and about her, about both the Louisville and NY PL’s, her schooling and mentors. Thank goodness so much is available digitized and I even joined Ancestry.com (for a free trial period) where I got more information on her family tree which I wanted to included but feared I may already have gotten a bit lengthy. Ancestry.com also netted me a snippet from a yearbook that is included in the tribute.

I chose to present this as if she were reminiscing about her life and profession and I hope I found a bit of her voice, but as I mentioned, her writing I found to be quite eloquent and I am sure I fell short. I also exercised a bit of poetic license to add a little more flavor and interest.
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