

**Rural Library Network in Peru:**

# Barefoot messengers

By John Medcalf\*

„*Senores bibliotecarios*, I am a simple illiterate woman but, thanks to one of your books, I have learned to make trousers and shirts. The men used to buy their clothes from a village called Hong Kong, but now they buy them from me.“

The Rural Library Network in northern Peru was inspired by a 12 year-old boy. In 1972, I was the new priest of the isolated and poverty-stricken parish of Bambamarca. Twenty thousand peasant families eked a living from maize and potatoes harvested at heights of up to 12,000 feet above sea level.

One wet afternoon a poncho-clad boy came to my office.

„Padre, our teacher says you have books.“

„Well of course I have books.“

„But I've never seen a book and I want to.“

„Well how did you learn to read without books?“

Leonardo Herrera then described how the teacher had a minuscule blackboard, and how the pupils would cut a cactus leaf on which they would carve letters and numbers with a nail, a key or a knife. So I selected from my book shelf a history of Peru written in Spanish and handed it to Leonardo. „I will lend this to you for a week, Leo. Then perhaps I'll lend you another book if you've looked after this one.“

Shortly before dawn the next day, I woke up to knocking of MacDuffian insistence. Expecting a sick-call, I confronted Leonardo instead.

„I've finished the book!“ he shouted triumphantly.

„You can't have done. There's no electricity in your village.“

„Oh, I borrowed a few candles from your church.“

The lad had sat up reading all night. He had even made spidery notes on paper I had given him and he wanted the second volume of the history of Peru.

Three decades later there are nearly 600 village libraries spread over the length of this mountainous country. The three principal influences on the network are the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, the barefoot doctors of China and the British public library system. Freire taught that literacy programmes were pointless without the availability of suitable reading materials; China warned us against vehicles, which would be difficult and expensive to maintain (we refused several

*\*John Medcalf spent 30 years as a priest in south and central America, founding the Rural Library Network in Peru in 1971. He is currently chairman of the Peru Support Group (PSG). Donations to the libraries may be sent to 122 Ladbroke Road, Redhill, Surrey, RH1 1LF For further information about Peru, call PSG at 0171-620-1103.*

offers of 'bibliobuses'); the British system encouraged us to give readers direct access to books (not just to a filing cabinet) and to adapt the Dewey System to our very special requirements.

The earliest rural libraries were attached to village schools, but when teachers failed to cooperate, village elders took over control. Librarians were proposed and elected by a show of hands. In addition to monthly visits to Cajamarca City to exchange the books, librarians took on responsibility for all cultural activities and even the protection of archaeological sites from marauders and tomb-robbers.

After a few years of modest success, a conservative mayor (who was also a big landowner) approached me one day: „Padre, what's so special about books? Why don't we put a television in every village instead?" His intentions were obvious. Books were subversive, awakening the minds of the *campesinos*. Television – especially the *Dallas* and *Dynasty* type of programmes to which we were then subjected – would quickly numb any tendency to creative thinking.

Our barefoot librarians walk up to 15 hours a day with a knapsack or – if they are lucky enough to have a pack animal – with a saddle-bag. These contain an average of 24 books. A typical selection would include books on health and first aid (*Where There is No Doctor* is a favourite);

history; children's stories (which are read by adults as well, making up for lost infancies); legislation (surprisingly popular, especially where the defence of their own interests is concerned); poetry, legends and folktales; a religious book or two; and perhaps a book about cooperatives and current affairs.

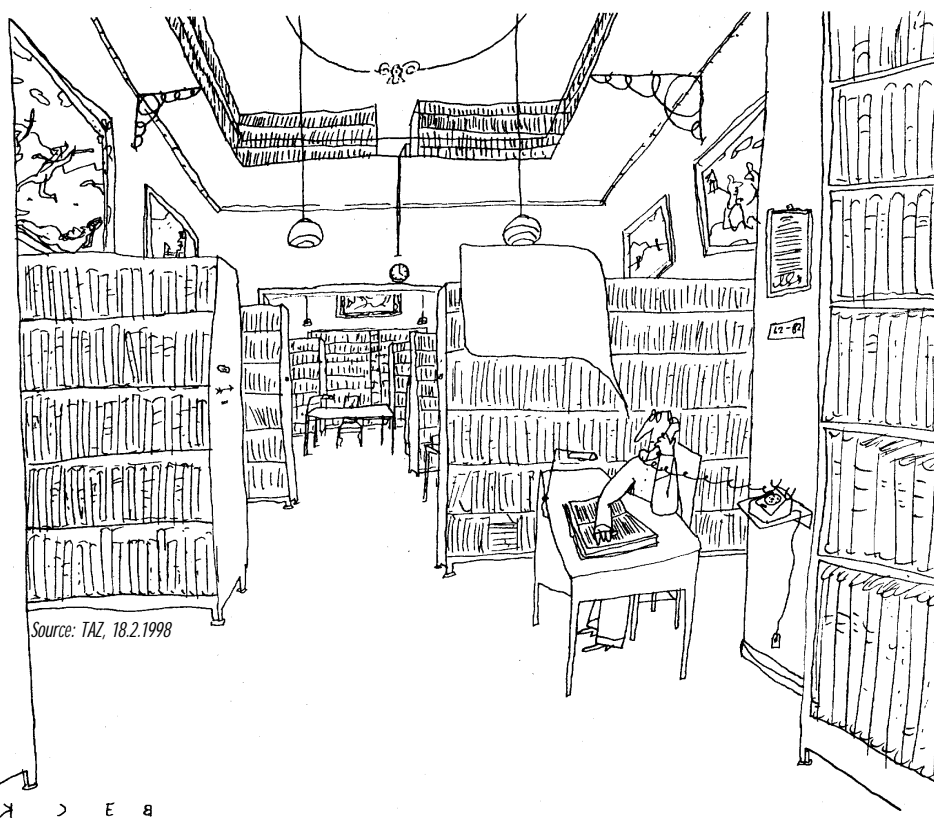
In recent years, my successor, Alfredo Mires, has encouraged the writing and publication of books by the peasant librarians and their readers. These illustrated books have proven to be enormously popular. After all, reading and writing (like charity) begin at home.

We were at a coordinators' meeting one day when a *campesina* woman interrupted us. „*Senores bibliotecarios*, I am a simple illiterate woman but, thanks to one of your books, I have learned to make trousers and shirts. The men used to buy their clothes from a village called Hong Kong, but now they buy them from me." Her children, who went to the village school, were able to read to the mother the text that accompanied the drawings.

Once we linked up with the Technical University of Cajamarca, when villagers requested practical help with

bee-keeping. The students were amazed at how proficient the *campesinos* had become thanks to books on agriculture published in Argentina and Uruguay.

The libraries continue to grow, in spite of government indifference and, in the past, open hostility. The network provides a cheap imitable model of adult education. Peasant families are encouraged not to migrate to the big cities. Leonardo is now a village schoolteacher, but libraries are still his first love. Like MacDuff, he knocked – and was answered.



Source: TAZ, 18.2.1998