



## A Profile of K. DOROTHY FERGUSON First Chapter President, 1924

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**P**icture this: San Francisco, 1922. A charming British librarian, fresh from providing library services to World War I troops in Europe, confronts the even-then legendary A. P. Giannini, entrepreneur and founder of Bank of Italy. "To be a great bank, you need a financial library," she tells him. "Moreover, you need me to organize it for you."

Giannini liked her spirit and agreed. Bank of Italy created the financial library, hired the librarian, and became a great bank. It became Bank of America.

The British librarian was K. Dorothy Ferguson, known to friends as Kate. The story of the founding of the Bank's library is the one she told a *San Francisco Examiner* reporter when, in 1928, the paper ran a story on the five women officers of Bank of Italy. The fact that she was one of those five women highlights how exceptional was K. Dorothy Ferguson and how highly the Bank regarded her library. Even today, not all bank librarians have officer status.

K. Dorothy Ferguson was born in Sandgate, England, in 1889. She held library jobs in Illinois before going back to Europe with the American European Forces. During the war she supplied recreational reading materials to the soldiers. After the war, she went to Coblenz as head librarian for the Army of the Occupation. Then she moved on to the Canal Zone as Army Librarian. From there it was north to San Francisco.

Meanwhile, Bank of Italy's Executive Committee had decided to establish a reference library. The decision was made in February 1921 and reported in the June 1921 issue of *Bankitaly Life*, the employee newsletter. The reference library was to be in the bank's new building at 1 Powell Street. The January 1923 issue of *Bankitaly Life* reports on progress and is the first mention of Ferguson as librarian. By the end of the year, she had a regular column in the newsletter called "Library Corner."

What was the library doing? Ask Ferguson. The aim of the library was "to collect data on banking subjects and to arrange such information so as to make it available for immediate use." Furthermore, "Books will form but a small part of our bank library . . . generally book information is not specific enough and besides it soon becomes obsolete in comparison with more recent newspaper, magazine, and government publications." The library

had a slogan: "When in need of data, consult our library. Call Local 427."

Although the library was well received and its staff grew to include at least one additional professional librarian, it was not immune from corporate scrutiny. In October 1927, the Executive Committee received a report from the Special Survey Committee. The issue: should the reference library be discontinued? The answer was "No." According to the report, the library saved bankers a considerable amount of time and had "an educational influence" on the "junior staff." In fact, the report ends with the recommendation that a branch in Los Angeles be established since the San Francisco library was so successful.

Ferguson was extremely active in Special Libraries Association, both on the Chapter and Division levels. In 1928 she was national chairman of the financial group of SLA, the precursor to Business & Finance Division. She is mentioned frequently in the Bay Region Chapter Bulletin and was obviously a role model to younger special librarians. She taught Special Libraries Administration at Berkeley's library school for five years (1928-1932) and took a year's leave of absence from Bank of America in the mid-1930s to go to New York to run a Carnegie Corporation-funded special project designed to promote the establishment of special libraries in trade associations.

After a long career at Bank of America, Ferguson resigned in 1943. She had spent over 20 years with the Bank, presiding over a growing library. However, she was not ready to leave the field of librarianship. Instead, she returned to London to take an assignment with the British government. At the age of 55 she went to West Africa to set up special libraries and a library school. The Special Libraries Directory of 1945 gives her address of c/o The British Consul, Accra, West Africa. By 1948 she had moved to Lagos, Nigeria.

What happened to Ferguson after 1948 is not known, at least not to me. What I do know is the legacy she left. Her attitude toward special libraries and toward information is just as relevant in the 1990s as it was in the 20s, 30s, and 40s. She knew special librarians had to be assertive, that the walls of a library did not define its contents, and that service was the most important thing a special library could offer.