THE MAKING OF A LIBRARIAN

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On 31 March 2012 I retired after 37 years working in libraries. What follows are some reflections on what I did in the earlier years after 4 January 1975 and on how I acquired the knowledge and skills that carried me further. I did not wake up on 1 April 2012 to find that I was no longer a librarian. Professional involvements continue and my title describes a continuing process! Previous life experience came into play in my professional formation so I devote time to events from 3 January 1975 and before.

These reflections form part of an informal professional autobiography. The world in which librarians and information workers operate now bears little relationship to that of my own early professional life, so here is an attempt to recreate the world in which I started out. Libraries, like any institutions, reflect the society in which they operate so I hope on the way to provide some insights into an educational and social world, which has also largely disappeared.

Early Intimations:

I was fortunate to grow up in a highly literate household. The spines and jackets of books on shelves were among my earliest visual impressions - indeed they were among the first things I learnt to read. I started off as a slow reader and then, when I was six and had a year of chronic illness, learnt very fast. I can remember picking an OUP text off a shelf, opening it at the back and making out the words ‘Geoffrey Cumberledge.’ When I was quite young I developed a facility for remembering names of authors and illustrators. My father had an account with Blackwell’s and so I got used to their parcels, with the result that entering the shop on my first visit to Oxford when I was 22 was like coming home! He also ordered books he selected from publishers’ catalogues and I got used to seeing these from an early age. From him I learnt that different imprints have different characters, do different sorts of publishing or reflect different viewpoints. The world of publishing was very different then! The knowledge that a book published by Sheed and Ward or Hollis and Carter will have a Catholic ethos or that one published (at least until the 1980s) by Lawrence and Wishart must be acceptable to the official line of the Communist Party later proved useful. The value of imprint statements is something I have tried to communicate to younger generations of librarians.

As I grew older I started buying books for myself, as well as presents for other people. In my later teens there were regular excursions to Belfast, notably to Mullan’s in Donegall Place, one of the finest bookshops to visit. However, my first real buying was done in Portadown itself, in the local newsagents. In such shops there would always be a few unexpected titles among the range of romances and racy paperbacks, items that might well have been sitting there for years. I still have GK Chesterton’s Orthodoxy and, something I saved up for, the Shell and BP Guide to Britain. It was my mother who gave me my first ever experience of book selection one Saturday afternoon when she asked me to look for a book for her to bring to a man who had restricted mobility through multiple
sclerosis. This man lived in the country and had a passionate interest in the natural world. I found a Pelican on *The Badger*. It had one of the older Pelican covers rather than the photographic ones Penguin was using by the later 60s, suggesting it had been in the shop for some years. I do not remember the author, but the name of the artist of the woodcut on the front cover stayed in my mind. He was Paxton Chadwick, whom years later I came across as one of the interesting group of creative figures associated with the British Communist Party.

I enjoyed using my school library, especially reading books that had sat on the shelves unread for years and ‘bringing them to life’. I acknowledge my debt to Eleanor Lynas who built it up. My further debt to her as an inspirational sixth form English teacher will become clear from some of my section headings. When I came to study A-level Latin and Greek I became intrigued by the imprint statements on some of my OUP and Pitt Press texts. Books bought as new in 1968 had in fact been printed in some cases before the First World War. There were other books that I bought, or my ever-generous father bought for me from Blackwell’s, at this period that I now consider myself extremely lucky to have, books that would simply not have stayed in print in modern marketing conditions. It did not occur to me that in any of this I was building a career! I set off to university in October 1969 without any great plans for the future.

**First Student Days:**
I cannot claim that I made brilliant scholarly use of one of the World’s great libraries during my four years as an undergraduate studying Classics at Trinity College, Dublin. As I remember it, our group was abandoned during the library induction tour in Fresher’s Week. It was a long time before I attained the sophistication of using the catalogues or filling out issue slips. I knew where the Classics books were and gained my first insight into the mysteries of library classification from the discovery that most of the books on Plato were in the philosophy section. I tended to use the Library as a workspace, bringing my own texts- or, perhaps more accurately, a place where I should be working and tended to get distracted! I was easily distracted (as my friends tartly commented) and probably did the most actual work at home in the vacations.

These distractions included the view from the window, other people and non-classics books. They may not have made me a brilliant classical scholar but for a future librarian, no time spent in a library is ever wasted. You become aware of it as a place for people. Mr. Tolpegin, a white-bearded Orthodox Jew, would stagger down the stairs with precariously balanced piles of books every night as closing time approached. None of us knew what he did although one of my friends surmised that he was translating the telephone directory into Persian. I never came in contact with more senior staff but remember the porters and the counter staff as pleasant and friendly. There was Harry Bovenizer, the snappy dresser with dark shoulder-length hair, who presided at the ground-floor issue desk. Unconsciously, I discovered that the frontline staff are the library for readers and create future respect for libraries. There were other useful lessons. When I hear complaints about the demands of equality provisions, I remember a
left-handed friend who could not use any of the chairs with armrests, useful when all desks were occupied, as they were all right-handed.

There was one particular distraction which proved later of incalculable value. I discovered the reference shelves in the Library and spent much time browsing there when I wanted a change from my classical texts. I learnt how to read ‘Who’s Who’ and various biographical and other directories, like the ‘Republic of China Yearbook’. This contrived quite effectively to give the impression that the state it referred to was the whole Chinese landmass rather than Taiwan and some smaller islands! I found the full ‘Dictionary of National Biography’. This apparent distraction laid the foundations of my future career as much as what I was actually in the library to do.

The place where these things happened was one of the great new pieces of library building. I cannot say that I really appreciated Paul Koralek’s fine design. It was just there and its merits did not strike me until I came to work in a university library where there had been less money to spend some years later. This was before the university built along Nassau Street and I shall always be grateful that I was the last generation of students to be able to appreciate Trinity as an enormous green space in the heart of a city and to look across from the Library to the classical perfection of the Manuscript Room. This was taken down while I was there and rebuilt on the UCD campus at Belfield.

One portent of my future was enjoyment of the exhilarating space of the Long Room. I was fortunate to grow up with this magnificent library building. One memory, again to resurface much later, is of an exhibition of eighteenth century French printing.

What then?
To young people now the approach to choosing a career of my pampered generation must seem incredibly casual. I would like to have been an academic but never got good enough results for this to be a serious option. Perhaps I should say that Classical Studies did feature more in my life than what I have written above may suggest. After a summer of angst in which I considered whether I had a vocation to the priesthood I took the default action for many of my generation and settled on a PGCE course. So I went to Sheffield University at the end of September 1973 to train as a Classics teacher.

Later Student Days:
Professionally, the year in Sheffield was a false start. I proved not to have the ability to manage groups of adolescents or present classical subjects to them and failed my teaching practice. My seven weeks in a girls’ school in Chesterfield, a painful learning experience for me, never mind the girls, are outside the scope of this paper! One negative effect was that for quite a few years I could not open my mouth in public without a prepared text. This was something I eventually had to relearn, after I went to Stormont in 1981. All this apart, the year was an extraordinarily rich one, both academically and personally. I liked the South Yorkshire/ North Derbyshire area. My tutor Jean Mingay became a lifelong friend and Professor Harry Armytage was benevolently supportive in the early part of
my career. My library use developed. One could borrow books from the Sheffield university library, unlike Trinity. I learnt to find my way round it and to use the catalogues. On one occasion I actually asked library staff for help with one of my essay topics. Through working in the postgraduate reading room, one of the pleasantest library workspaces I have experienced, I also encountered people training to be librarians on the master’s degree courses Sheffield was pioneering. Here I first came across law librarianship, in which one of my Trinity contemporaries Jenny Thomas, later Jenny Aston, was doing the (then quite new) degree course in the subject. Today she counts as the librarian I have known longest! Through one of my fellow students going to the city library and getting posters of Greek mythological figures for his project I started to learn other things that libraries could do. My course work later proved of unexpected value. The Trinity Classics course placed its major stress on reading and translation. This was good in literary and linguistic terms but gave limited experience in writing essays. It was at Sheffield, and later in my library training, that I learnt to write. Having to marshal my thoughts on educational philosophy and other unfamiliar topics proved very useful when, eight or so years later, I had as an administrator to write papers and make cases for a particular course of action. The Sheffield course also introduced me to official publications through a brilliant lecture by Harry Armytage summarizing the reports of the Central Advisory Committee for Education and its predecessors.

Career choice:
In July 1974 I returned home not knowing what to do next. I drifted for several months until my mother suggested that I really ought to try becoming a librarian. Feeling guilty that I had worried my long-suffering parents I compiled a CV, which my father typed and printed on his duplicator and sent it round a variety of libraries, public, academic and national, asking if they had any vacancies. These I identified from Whitaker’s Almanac and the Educational Authorities Yearbook. It did not strike me that this very process actually counted as part of the training as a reference librarian. I got a variety of replies, some dismissive, some helpful. One batch included one to the National Library of Wales. I noticed with some surprise that this was in Aberystwyth rather than Cardiff and forgot about it. Long after I had given up expecting a reply I heard from them that their SCONUL trainee had withdrawn and asking would I like to be considered. I replied positively and eventually went for an interview on 19 December 1974. I was appointed and my search for a post was at an end. At about the same time I was called for an interview at Boston Spa as an assistant scientific officer (job requirement: 3 O-levels). There was no contest, but at the back of my mind there is the thought that a career in the British Library was a possibility. What now amazes me, and younger generations would envy, is both that I obtained a post in this way and that the whole process from deciding to look for a job in libraries until my appointment took about ten weeks!

Early days:
I started work in the National Library of Wales on 6 January 1975. I knew nothing about Wales, whose borders I had never crossed before my interview. The first culture shock was the discovery of Welsh as the language of work and social life. It was rather different from attitudes to Irish in Dublin! My experience
outside Ireland had largely been of urban areas in England and my first journey
to Aberystwyth had been after dark. I gazed in some amazement at the scenery
from the train window as I returned from my interview. I settled down to life in
a small Welsh seaside town, miles from any major center of population.

The National Library of Wales had been established as a result of a campaign in
the late nineteenth century. Sir John Williams, physician to the royal family and
book collector, had acquired the most important Welsh manuscripts. He agreed
to donate his collection to the National Library if it was established in
Aberystwyth. Since there could be no National Library without his collection, to
Aberystwyth it came. It functions as both a Copyright Library and a central
institution of Welsh language and culture.

Every morning I climbed Penglais Hill to the Library, a superb building from the
same era as Stormont. It was a wonderful place to work. The Department of
Printed Books was responsible for all the books received under the terms of the
Copyright Libraries Acts and much else. My first job was to catalogue books on
sport using AACR and to reclassify them according to the revised Library of
Congress GV schedules. One of my memories of my first day is looking up a
Rugby League player called Lewis Jones in the library’s card catalogue. The
problems of looking up the name Jones, Lewis in the catalogue of the National
Library of Wales can be imagined! There were about 30 of them, most of them
apparently Calvinistic Methodist ministers who had published one or two
sermons. Many of them had old style location descriptions (of…) attached to
their names and the places were long Welsh names with whose make up I had
not yet become familiar. I was very relieved when on my second search through I
found Jones, Lewis, of Leeds! Under the excellent and patient tuition of Llinos
Davies I learnt how to provide exact punctuation, to know when added entries
were required and to navigate the Library of Congress schedules. Llinos was
also a classicist and saw that my Latin and Greek were put to good use. Here I
made my first acquaintance with Byzantine literature. I went on to catalogue
books in and about oriental languages and to learn how to catalogue books from
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. My debt to Llinos is immense. In the
second half of my time in the National Library I catalogued and classified new
books in philosophy, psychology, religion and all the topics covered by the LC B
schedules. Working in a copyright library you discover the sheer variety of what
is published and come to revel in its frequently eccentric richness, even if the
amount is overwhelming! To take one example, there is a large literature on
spiritualism with its own authors and publishers but probably few people
outside this subculture are aware of its existence. I learnt the importance of
looking after this material even if no one ever looked at it. One was working for
the researcher who might come after.

The National Library was a wonderful and very welcoming community. In my
first few weeks there was an exhibition on the nearby estate of Hafod. I asked
one of the porters where it was, to be told how he helped dig through a twenty
foot snowdrift to get to it in the winter of 1947. The Library employed people in
every discipline and trade, something that no longer happens in modern
conditions of outsourcing and procurement regimes. I remember a lunchtime
when Daniel Huws, expert on Welsh manuscripts, fine poet and modest and unassuming man, and the library’s printer discussed their campaign to get a sports field for the village where they both lived. My colleagues in the Herbert Morgan Room were very supportive of me. I would often come back from lunch and find a sweet on my desk. Somehow, this was very touching. Having everyone around me speaking Welsh made me appreciate the value of a bilingual atmosphere and I enjoyed the discovery of a different culture to my own. One practical skill I gained was the ability to type my own catalogue entries - my muttered groans and curses as I painfully acquired this knowledge caused my colleagues much amusement. I started to build up a wider knowledge of books and related topics through membership of the Aberystwyth Bibliographical Group. My final weeks in the National Library were spent in the Department of Manuscripts and later in my career I was glad of this experience of working with non-printed material. I look back on this period as one of the most enjoyable times I spent working in libraries. When I said this to one of my later teachers he reasonably pointed out that I had no responsibility then!

Professional Training:
Practically as soon as I arrived in the National Library I started applying for professional training courses. By Easter 1975 I had been accepted by the College of Librarianship Wales (CLW) on the edge of Aberystwyth at Llanbadarn Fawr. I was glad not to have to uproot myself again so soon. I started the one-year postgraduate diploma course there on 29 September 1975.

CLW had been founded in 1964 and was the only college in Britain devoted solely to training librarians, another monument to the generous era of public funding for higher education. Its fine purpose-built buildings were then quite new. There were over a hundred students on the postgraduate course, a good mixture of people from the United Kingdom and overseas, many from Africa and Asia. The latter were there through the efforts of Frank Hogg, the inspirational principal and founder of the college, whom I, and several generations of students, never saw, as he was abroad, building up support and funding. All the courses validated by the Library Association had standard modules on library management, cataloguing and classification (known in CLW as ‘The Organization of Knowledge’ – many years before the term ‘knowledge management’ was invented!) and reference work. CLW was especially generous in the provision of courses for the fourth, optional module, as well as allowing opportunities for following specific interests in the compulsory ones. My year at CLW started with a personal tragedy. My father’s health had not been good for the last two years and three weeks after starting the course I was summoned home. He died the next week. This shaped my year. When eventually I returned to the college I had a lot of catching up to do. I worked far harder than in the rest of my higher education, with very little relaxation. In the circumstances I had little appetite for social life. I had just become used to not being a student, was tired of student life and not very happy in my accommodation. For all these reasons, I did not appreciate CLW as much at the time as I came to later.

It was no fault of the college that the world for which we were trained largely disappeared within a few years, as did the world in which most of us had
received our higher education. The seventies was a privileged era for students with readily available grants and good employment opportunities. Later generations of people our age would probably share what was I imagine the common view among our parents that we were a spoiled lot who didn’t appreciate our advantages and were casual and amateurish in our approach to life! We were trained on the assumption that most of us would work in the public sector, either in public libraries, for which the majority of the staff had a preference as this represented their own background, or in academic institutions. Some attention was paid to ‘special libraries’, mainly in industry or specialized research bodies. Law librarianship was not mentioned and I didn’t know that solicitors’ firms employed librarians until I started attending BIALL conferences some twelve years later. A Labour government was in power and the assumption was that the public sector was the place to be. We had no inkling of what would hit us in 1979! There was a group of dynamic young people on the staff, graduates from the heady days of the late sixties, and I have often suspected that the greatest enthusiasts for bringing information to the people in 1976 actually spent most of their careers as fervent advocates of services to business and income generating activities! I am certain that relatively few of us postgraduate diploma students have had the sort of careers mapped out for us when we qualified in 1976. The ‘special’ sector of libraries also changed greatly with the decline in large British industrial concerns and in the decrease of public funding for the sort of research bodies employing librarians in the 1970s.

It is a compliment to our training that there have been many times in later years when I have found myself wishing I had paid more attention! When you had been a junior member of staff in a large library it was hard to see the sort of management training we received in ‘PG1’ as relevant to your life, but I remembered it six years later, when with no administrative experience whatever I found myself a manager learning a lot of things painfully. The lectures did make students aware of classical management theory, something that was to prove useful in later years when I went on civil service management courses, and what the various structures were and the seminars encouraged one to look at areas like shortlisting and dealing with personnel problems and to think them through. Many former students, like myself, found ourselves doing these things in circumstances our teachers and ourselves could not have imagined and the teaching held up quite well. The 1975-76 PG class at CLW, remembered by our teachers as a difficult and argumentative crew, grumbled a lot about PG1 and I owe it to the staff to say this now. I also appreciated the support I received for my special project on rare book librarianship, which like so much was to bear fruit in ways I could never have anticipated at the time.

‘PG2’, on cataloguing and classification also seemed rather theoretical at the time and inevitably developments in information technology dated it rather quickly. Would younger generations have heard of précis strings? Yet there was much that was highly practical. We learn thoroughly how different classification schemes operated and gained valuable cataloguing experience on the college’s practice collection- books and other materials bought as a job lot from dealers. Great arguments developed over whether one item was a record accompanied by a book or a book accompanied by a record! The books seemed to have been
chosen for their recondite quality, although I’m sure there are generations of students who will have fond memories of such works as ‘Tempest over Tahiti’, ‘Enemies of Timber’, or, perhaps most outre of all, ‘Leather for Librarians’ by the Leather Committee of the Library Association! These exercises helped me build on my experience at the National Library. My subsequent cataloguing benefitted from this experience of having to notice what was unusual in a book, like the leather samples in the endpapers of *Leather for Librarians*. Years later I found myself appreciating, again more than I did at the time, the exercise on the choice of a classification scheme for the college’s own library. To assist us in doing this, we were given a paper setting out possible options. In a seminar I pointed out (being in ways rather a brash young man) that the conclusion of the paper did not tally with the argument being put forward in its course. Tom Burrell, who was, I think, then acting head of the department, looked very taken aback and admitted that this was in fact the paper prepared by the college librarian before this decision had been taken some years earlier, that the paper’s argument represented his personal preference and the conclusion was the result of his being ‘leaned on’ - not least by some senior members of his own staff! Had I had ‘ears to hear’ I would have learnt an important lesson about how organizations actually take decisions!

To PG3, on reference services, I owe a lifelong debt. The grounding in reference sources and the very practical seminars were to prove useful in years to come, as was the experience of developing personal research through an annotated subject bibliography. Especially valuable in those days before online searching was the experience of working through bibliographies and years of the *British Humanities Index* and discovering the sense of achievement when one found several useful items. One also learnt how to ask questions to be sure of what people wanted. One seminar consisted of sample reference questions, like “I’m doing a project on Elizabeth Taylor” (Do they mean the film star or the novelist?) and “I would like a picture of Pantycelyn” (the place or the poet and hymn writer William Williams Pantycelyn?). The value of this training was brought home to me in my later years of working when I tried these questions on some of my younger colleagues and they didn’t see the point of the exercise! One important feature of PG3 was the excellent listing of reference sources produced for the course. When six years later I found myself having to expand, and virtually to create, a reference collection rather quickly, I requested a copy of the latest edition from the College and was not the only working librarian to do so. PG3 also gave me the opportunity to begin my study of church history through my subject bibliography on Nicholas Ferrar and the Community of Little Gidding, a topic to which I have returned over the years and hope to do further work. As often with my CLW training the work on the subject bibliography was to bear unexpected fruit. Without this experience I would have found it harder to do the sort of bibliographical work on legislation and related topics that was to be a major part of my work at Stormont many years later. The contribution to my professional life of Ray Lonsdale, Garth Homer and, above all, Lionel Madden, cannot be over-estimated. Garth Homer advised us to look at how people outside libraries dealt with information queries, citing the young man who then worked in Aberystwyth railway station. This is again something I would pass on to
younger generations. My chosen example would be the staff in old-style hardware and DIY shops.

The range of topics studied at CLW was very wide and so there was a generous range of choices for PG4, the optional part of the course. Services for children and young people were especially popular. I had originally intended to do archive and records management. However, encouraged by Llinos Davies, I opted for historical and analytical bibliography. Peter Wright in his fascinating lectures brought a badly needed historical context to my earlier interests in publishing and illustration. John Harris complemented this with his meticulous introduction to the physical makeup of books and to bibliographical description. The resources of the college allowed me to do detailed work on seventeenth and eighteenth century texts. The discipline of producing these very exact descriptions was an important part of my intellectual formation. The combination of my PG4 work and my classical background made this the area I wished to specialize in when I qualified. My bibliographical studies were complemented by attendance at meetings of the Aberystwyth Bibliographical Group and the friendly guidance of Richard Brinkley of the UCW library. Richard, a colorful and ultimately tragic figure, will be remembered with gratitude by generations of UCW students. His unfailing helpfulness and ability to produce exactly what one needed to advance the work in hand made a strong contribution to my professional education. I had already read about Eric Gill and, as time was short, made him the subject of my PG4 project. This helped to develop another lifelong interest and I fully exploited Aberystwyth’s superb library resources. These included the college’s own fine bibliographical collections and, of course, the National Library itself. I enjoyed sitting in solitary splendor at the table in the middle of the reading room ‘reserved for the readers of rare books’ while I looked at the magnificent collection of Golden Cockerel and other private press books. (Perhaps the finest was the catalogue of the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art printed by the Stourton Press, using Gill’s Aries type).

Four weeks of fieldwork were an important part of the training. It was stipulated that these should be in a different type of library to one’s previous experience and not in one’s home area. It is a sign of a vanished age of generous funding that these stipulations could be made. In January 1976 I returned to Sheffield, where I already had family and friends, to spend four weeks in the city library service. This was my real introduction to public librarianship, to learning how to operate the Brown circulating system in a busy branch library on a Saturday morning (I tried to shut out the muttered grumblings of ‘they’re very slow today!’ from further down the queue.) and much else. I gained experience of work on busy enquiry desks operating largely by telephone and discovered the range of things libraries do in communities. It was a very different world to anything I had experienced to be asked if we had any information on a dealer in used spares called Jim Matthews. One lesson from this inquiry was to always ask how many ‘t’s there are in Matthews/ Mathews. I felt a great sense of achievement at the first enquiry I answered completely on my own. I was asked for an organization for French assistants in British schools. I walked to the reference shelves and discovered the Directory of British Associations. Seven years later it was to be
among the first books I ordered in Stormont. This taste of work on a busy public reference desk, even if it was brief was something I valued the more as later on I came to realize that it is something many librarians in the public service never get. I had the good fortune to meet the inspirational Angela Allott, head of science and business services. Everyone who met her has an Angela story. One morning I was with other staff at the inquiry desk in the humanities reading room, which was full of industrious figures with heads bent over the tables. Angela walked in and noticed among the magazines at the table behind the counter a film magazine with a lurid picture. ‘All these orgies in films look so dull’, said Angela, looking round at her assembled colleagues, ‘I’m sure we could organize a far better orgy!’ At that all the industrious heads in the room could be seen to rise for a few inches to assess the accuracy of this statement. As well as the fieldwork we all went on study tours, in my case to South Wales, where we saw every variety of library. This was my introduction to Cathays Park, which I consider the finest academic and administrative center I have ever seen - in Belfast terms Stormont and Queen’s University and the Botanic Gardens rolled into one!

At Aberystwyth I learnt to appreciate the atmospheric qualities of libraries. The National Library overlooks the town and is the landmark of arrival or leave taking on railway journeys. Looking down from it I came to recognize the different colors of the sea. As atmospheric was the UCW library in the Old College Building on the sea front. There was a room at the back with bound periodical volumes. It jutted out on the rocks and one was aware of the sea thundering below.

One haunting memory of CLW lingers. It is of the college library late one afternoon. There was a magnificent sunset over Cardigan Bay. Without a word being said, everyone gravitated towards the large window to look out at it. While it was in many ways a difficult year for me personally, I look back on my time there with affection and gratitude. It is in some was a tribute to the training we received that much of its value did not become apparent until I had management responsibility, considerably after I left. I have devoted so much time to my training because the world it was part of will be simply unrecognizable to younger generations. It was around this time that Frank Hogg visited Iran where the Shah planned the largest national library in the world. An agreement was made that CLW would train the myriad librarians this institution would need. In 1979 the Shah vanished and so did his library and its dream child librarians. It is not only our pasts that belong to a vanished age. So do the futures we have looked to.

I sought a theme...
In June 1976 I qualified as a librarian and returned to Portadown, ready for a badly needed break. This was one of the hottest summers on record. Rather sluggishly I began applying for jobs. I subscribed to the Times Literary Supplement, where all library jobs were advertised. (Very few of the younger generation of librarians will know that the CILIP vacancies listings owe their existence to the closedown of Times Newspapers for nearly a year at the end of 1978. The loss to TLS in both advertising and subscriptions over the years does
not bear thinking about.) I wished to work outside Northern Ireland in academic libraries and with special collections. My personal story over the next sixteen months was to be what perhaps I can euphemistically describe as a modification of these ambitions!

In July I obtained an interview to work in the rare books department at Trinity College Dublin. Attendance at this involved curtailing a holiday in France after six days. I did not give of my best and now shudder at how casually I arrived after a continuous boat and train journey of about 30 hours! Afterwards I remember thinking that I would be embarrassed to meet the members of the selection panel again. It was only when I gained experience of the other side of the interviewing table that I realized one does not remember very much about the candidates. At a reception more than a quarter of a century later I realized that the man I was talking to had chaired this panel – something I pointed out to him with some amusement. My next interview was as cataloguer of Archbishop Leighton’s Library at Dunblane Cathedral, a post at Stirling University library. My failure to get this post I badly wanted now seems a turning point.

Time was getting on and the hot summer came to an end. With the arrival of September I became uneasy. I had not wanted to work in public libraries and emphatically did not want to come back permanently to Portadown. However, I needed to earn my living and reluctantly applied for a series of posts as assistant librarian with the Southern Education and Library Board. At the end of September I was interviewed, again unsuccessfully. I applied for more and more jobs. The arrival of the TLS at the newsagent’s become the focal point of the week. My mother kindly collected it for me, as its frequent delays became more than I could bear. The requests for particulars would go off, one would wait for the application forms. They would be filled in, or CVs laboriously typed out. With these there was always the sense of relief once one page had been completed without the need to start all over again. Those who have grown up with the Internet may not appreciate how protracted every transaction was and the amount of patient waiting we had to do. The rejections started to mount up. (There was no appeal and no question of feedback!)

There were two considerations. In the first place, far more librarians had been trained in the United Kingdom than were jobs available. There had been a period of expansion in the early 70s with many jobs filled a year or so earlier. Secondly, the generous era of higher education had quietly come to an end. Cutbacks in public expenditure did not start with the Thatcher government but with the chancellorship of Denis Healey. One was also up against more experienced candidates and my work experience was rather specialized.

Later generations would envy the number of jobs there were to apply for in every sort of institution and every part of the United Kingdom- public libraries, universities, technical colleges, industry and much more. A few stick in the memory. Jobs with Oxford University stipulated that the jobholder must live within a five-mile radius of the Carfax Tower- something surely difficult to enforce by 1976. There was an institute of tin mining in Cornwall. There was a post as librarian at USAF Alconbury, providing a library service to personnel and
families at an American air base. I applied for a job at a scientific research institute called BCIRA. The particulars did not make it clear what BCIRA actually did, so I attempted to conceal my ignorance. I got an interview in early November 1976 for posts as assistant librarian in the Open University- a far better job than many for which I did not get shortlisted. By this stage I was so pleased to get an interview that I didn’t really mind not getting the job. I journeyed across a major part of England taking care of my suit and felt mildly aggrieved when one interviewer was in his shirtsleeves and another (a woman) in polo neck jumper and trousers. When I was on interviewing panels myself I always tried to dress smartly. Autumn turned into winter. My mother was very tolerant with me but I felt I was letting her down. In fact I received more understanding from her and others of her generation than people closer to me in age. They had come to maturity in the boom years while my mother’s generation had been at my stage in the thirties. I started to feel so conspicuous that I did not leave the house until dusk. I finally obtained a permanent post in October 1977, 15 months after qualification, after applied for over 130 applications and 13 interviews. Interestingly, I have no memory of advertisements for librarians in solicitors’ firms.

However my situation had been transformed long before that. On the last day before the start of the Christmas holidays in 1976 I received an utterly unexpected phone call. Harry Carson, Chief Librarian of the Southern Education and Library Board, offered me three months temporary work as an assistant librarian. No Christmas present has ever been better! My 35 years of work as a professional librarian were about to start.

My circus animals were all on show:
The Southern Education and Library Board was one of five authorities created as part of a shakeup of local government. They brought together parts of old county authorities and Carnegie libraries like that in Portadown. Centered on Armagh city, the Southern Board covered not only County Armagh, but also parts of three of Northern Ireland’s five other counties. Until a new building was ready the library headquarters were based in what was intended to be the branch library for central Craigavon. There was an annex in a local secondary school a few minutes walk away. Craigavon was Northern Ireland’s contribution to the new town developments of the 1960s. It was intended to combine the two towns of Lurgan and Portadown. This never quite happened and in practice ‘Craigavon’ consisted of the area between the two towns, a series of nondescript grey housing estates with no clear center, joined by a warren of roads, roundabouts and footpaths. (Many years later the blocks of flats built in the Communist era in Central Europe reminded me of Craigavon.) I visited the headquarters for the first time in the week after my phone call. Within about three miles of where I had spent the greater part of my life I found myself more utterly lost than I had ever been in London or further afield! When I started work I was fortunate to get a lift. However, on the days when I travelled there by bus I was always nervous about missing my stop, as there were no landmarks to indicate its approach.

That great and good man Harry Carson at this time employed three assistant librarians on temporary contracts. Our salaries came out of his book fund,
something that will seem to later generations as remote as King Arthur in Camelot. The starting salary of assistant librarians in public libraries, as I knew well from all my applications, was £2922. (We got slightly more as our posts were not superannuated). This was a better salary than many newly qualified librarians had - including myself in my first permanent post. The building was yet another of Craigavon’s nondescript grey buildings. My first impression was misleadingly racy, as I walked between piles of boxes labeled White Horse Whisky. This was not the result of some spectacular party but evidence of the large number of books being received. Lending was at the heart of SELB’s services. There was a highly efficient enterprise of ordering, storing and transporting stock. The public face of the service was through its branch libraries, its mobile and housebound services and its very good primary and secondary school and audio-visual services. All these were still melding together as one organization, SELB being less than three years old.

I was employed in the Requests Department. Our job was to go through the large number of requests submitted on cards from the branches for books to locate them from the catalogue within the service or, if not in stock, to find bibliographical details and submit for ordering. I was at once glad of CLW’s grounding as the sole training I received was to be told ‘Of course you know all the places to look’. In the days when I myself was involved in the induction of new staff such a reply would not have been acceptable. The concept of training was one that evolved greatly during my working life. So I took stock of the bibliographies shelved round our work area and started in. I had an immediate experience of the extraordinary variety of requests received when my first consignment included half a dozen or so Spanish texts. I found a catalogue from an exhibition of Spanish books in Britain and identified them all. The patterns soon emerged. I discovered a whole world of popular fiction that I was unaware of- Catherine Cookson, Lozania Prole, Jean Plaidy and Victoria Holt [the latter just two of Eleanor Hibbert's pseudonyms], the many-named John Creasy and multitudinous others. I came to appreciate the expert bibliographical knowledge of colleagues who could disentangle the welter of pseudonyms and the whole world of TV tie-ins. One of the many human professional lessons I learnt at Craigavon was the value of pooling professional knowledge. There were the constant requests for car manuals. One could have followed the vicissitudes of the British car industry through looking at the prefixes following 629.2222 in the SELB’s catalogue. I also began to pick up knowledge of the localities we served, to know that ‘BWT’ stood for Blackwatertown and to discover unfamiliar place names like Meigh or Bush.

The human and social lessons of my time in Craigavon balanced the purely professional ones- and human skills are as important for a librarian as any others. I had passed most of my life in an academic environment and now I was making my first substantial move outside this comfort zone. The experience of living at home and working a few miles from where I had grown up brought me as great challenges as anything else I had ever done. The library assistants in the Requests Department taught me a great deal. I started to learn the distinction between being helpful and being interfering. I learnt how to live with the differences that exist among small groups of people. One afternoon I was going
through the piles of car manual requests. A common spelling mistake kept recurring. I made a remark about the constant appearances of ‘the well-known Spanish motor mechanic Workshop Manuel’. A woman said ‘that hurt’. I had not intended the remark to be offensive but her response affected me more than all the earnest and well intentioned training on ‘dignity at work’ and the like I came across in later years. I never made a joke like that again. This is not to say that life in the Requests Department was particularly solemn. My colleague Brendan McGeown, who was then a trainee librarian and went on to greater things in the library service, had a rich appreciation of life’s absurdities. In retrospect it feels as though I laughed more in the six months I sat beside him than in all the subsequent years!

I became responsible for answering subject requests. The SELB had no public reference library and branches would submit requests for books or information on particular subjects. I had to sort through these and answer them. If I could not answer them from the service’s own collections I was to select and arrange for the purchase of suitable stock. Once again, I had reason to be grateful to CLW’s training and to having had the opportunity to dip my toe into the world of public library reference work in Sheffield. The range of what I was asked to find out, it now seems to me, was as great as anything in my subsequent career. Many of the concepts were unfamiliar to me. My mother told me what ‘drawn thread work’ was. (Interestingly, a large number of requests for books on various aspects of needlework came from an area with distinguished traditions of lacemaking and embroidery.) There have been few jobs where I learnt so much so quickly. There were requests from sixth formers wanting to know about subjects they might study at university, so I became familiar with a series called ‘Degree Course Guides’. People wanted practical information on far-flung countries, so I started using the British Overseas Trade Board’s excellent ‘Hints for British Businessmen Travelling Abroad’, which I had seen first on my fieldwork in Sheffield. A year or so later, in the spirit of an era of equal opportunities, the title was changed to ‘Hints for Exporters’. Not long afterwards, reflecting a different cultural change, the BOTB started charging for them. One day I had to find an HMSO publication and started looking through the set of Sectional Lists, our only HMSO catalogues. I felt no premonition that I had embarked on one of my main future professional activities.

My time in the Requests Department made me immensely aware of people’s inner lives, of their interests away from their work and how they enlarged their world. One example I remember now is the Presbyterian minister from the Tyrone countryside who requested books on Art Deco. It was a privilege to work for such people. It should also be remembered that this was a time of conflict and danger in Northern Ireland and many of the areas we served were troubled places. In such circumstances normal living takes on a heroic quality. One comes to appreciate the precarious wonder and beauty of the everyday. The staff in the secondary schools service told me that they always received a great welcome on their regular visits to one school in a particularly troubled region. The area’s reputation was such that few people from outside visited the school. The public library service played an important part in holding normal life together in often impossibly painful circumstances.
One day, which I think was a school holiday, two women who may have been on the staff appeared with two young girls and asked rather diffidently if we had anything to help with a project on ‘the great deserts of the World’. (Brendan McGeown and one or two others immediately shouted ‘Craigavon’!) I stepped in and took the two girls to some children’s encyclopedias and somehow found what they needed. The two women were immensely grateful. I don’t know if I felt any greater sense of achievement from any complex legislation query. No one would have seen me as a natural children’s librarian, yet here I was, working usefully in a world that was unfamiliar to me.

My three months in the Southern Board turned into six. I was then given a new nine months contract, to 31 March 1978. After six months with Requests I moved to Irish and Local Studies. My main task was to go through several years’ back issues of Irish daily and also some local papers looking for items of historical and other interest, cutting them out and pasting them on cards, in effect creating an archive. As it turned out, I did not get the opportunity to index and arrange the material I had selected. However, this work was the start of an involvement with newspapers and newspaper indexing I was to resume in Stormont, after a six year gap, in 1983. I also catalogued new material for the remarkable collection of Irish and local material Joe Canning, SELB’s distinguished local studies librarian, was purchasing to augment the strong collections the Board had inherited. This was valuable cataloguing experience and an opportunity to learn to use the Dewey classification. More than this, I enjoyed the variety of the material. I remember a set of early nineteenth century Quaker pamphlets. The foreign language cataloguing I had done in the National Library meant that I was prepared to work with Irish language publications, which here I encountered for the first time. Through the SELB’s collection I first discovered that an Irish collection covers many more areas than Ireland, reflecting both the spread of the Irish over all over the world and the fact that no country exists in isolation. Thus an Irish collection will include, among many other fields, material on the Normans, the Vikings, the Spanish Armada and the French Revolution. All this was good preparation for when, just four years later, I unexpectedly found myself the custodian of a fine Irish collection. The last items I catalogued for Joe, on my last afternoon with the SELB, were two maps originally attached to an Act promoting a railway. Again, I was utterly unaware that this was my introduction to what was, five or six years later, to develop into one of my main professional activities.

It was a privilege to work for a well funded and expanding public service. The level of funding in public libraries makes this an era of utter remoteness. Libraries were being expanded and developed and we would never have imagined that within thirty years book funds would be frozen and branches closed. As well as the generous book and audio-visual provision, SELB had purchased paintings for a picture lending service. This level of expenditure not merely created work for library staff but contributed to the livelihood of others. There was a friendly Yorkshire man, a retired Rugby League player, who every week delivered stock from a library supplier round the different Northern Ireland board library headquarters buildings and who also provided an informal
courier service between them. The effects of library cuts on his one-man haulage business must have been catastrophic.

Throughout my time in Craigavon I continued applying for jobs, with nine more interviews. As 1977 drew to a close, I looked forward to a more settled time than I had enjoyed for several years. My twelfth interview was for a post of senior library assistant at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine. I was runner-up. They found themselves in a position to create a second post, which I was offered. The end of my long search for a permanent post was over.

Where All the Ladders Start:
I started work in Coleraine on 1 November 1977. In the event I was to work there for nearly four years, until 31 August 1981. The New University of Ulster (NUU) had been created as Northern Ireland’s contribution to the great 1960s expansion of higher education. The first students were admitted in 1968. It incorporated a much older institution, Magee University College in Derry/Londonderry. Before the creation of NUU Magee students completed their degree courses at Trinity and I had known several of the last generation of these in my time there. Many students came from North West Ulster with a scattering from further afield. There were quite a few from overseas, especially Africa. The university had not developed as envisaged at its foundation. Its buildings were of sixties design and of varying quality. There were two parts known as Phase 1 and Phase 2 (later renamed South and Central Buildings) joined by a covered walkway across a piece of open ground that tended to become waterlogged in the frequent rain and was popularly known as the ‘inter-phasal bog’. The main library extended along much of the top floor of Phase 2 and was a pioneering example of a ‘spine library’. There was also a library in Phase 1.

While I and one of the other post-holders were qualified librarians and the work we were doing was that of librarians, a professional qualification was not a prerequisite for the post and it was obvious that, while valuable for building up experience in an academic library, my post was not going to be something I would wish to do long term. Just before I arrived there was a reorganization of functions and as a result I was to have two main responsibilities, for cataloguing (as one of two senior library assistants) and looking after the official publications collection. I was based in the cataloguing room in the Phase Two building. As a workplace it is best described as functional. To someone used to older buildings NUU lacked atmosphere. Also there had been pressure to complete the Phase 2 building quickly and the haste was evident as there were leaking roofs at some point in the library- something the climate in North West Ulster will always put the test! (After NUU was absorbed into the University of Ulster in 1984 major renovations were carried out.)

Computers now entered my professional life seriously for the first time. So far they had been the development that was about to happen. At CLW Lucy Tedd was at the early stages of the teaching of electronic applications in libraries, which she was to carry on through the technical revolutions of the subsequent decades. I have always been grateful for her explanations of how computers searched for information. In my Sheffield fieldwork a senior member of the
cataloguing staff provided an overview of how computerized cataloging worked that counts as my personal introduction to this area. Do generations for whom the computer has always been a part of life receive this sort of theoretical underpinning? The 1970s was a time of technical developments, some of which proved evanescent. Typists acquired more complex technical machines and the skill to manage them, with no thought that within a few years typing pools would largely disappear. One machine with a brief lifespan was the flexowriter. It seemed incredibly progressive at the time, but I never worked out exactly what it did and the only use I ever saw of it was for the production of Christmas decorations from the quantity of paper tape it produced! NUU was electronically in advance of most libraries of its era. It had a computerized circulation system using Plessey light pens and MARC cataloguing. In the mid-70s the use of light pens by supermarkets was still some years off. This was beginning to change by the end of the 70s, but in 1977 computers were still all mainframe, the preserve of qualified technical staff. Online searching was a development of the later 1970s and here again NUU librarians were pioneers. I myself was not involved in it until the 1980s, where my memories of Lucy Tedd’s lectures again proved valuable. Searching however remained an expensive business until the 1990s and the spread of the Internet.

Patrick Teskey, as sub-librarian in charge of the cataloguing department was a wise and infinitely patient teacher. He meticulously checked every record of all the people who catalogued, something I tried to do years later when I had other cataloguers to supervise. He himself was in the process of learning about MARC cataloguing as he had taken over responsibilities in the week before I arrived. We worked offline. Worksheets were completed in red ink for each book, to be sent through in batches for data processing. I no longer remember why red ink was used. However, more than 30 years after I last did MARC cataloguing I still remember the codes and the fields. (For some books we received records from the British Library. These came printed out and had to be amended to suit our house style.) The library catalogue was a card catalogue, with the cards printed out from the computer record. Life revolved around it as much as our desks. One would complete about 30 worksheets and then go to check every heading. It was not for nothing that the worksheets had a blank space at the bottom for notes. One would of course very often have checked the catalogue more than once it in the process of completing the worksheets. This time spent at the catalogue was of immense value. I came to know the stock. It was possible to identify and correct mistakes. It was possible to observe people using it and so identify deficiencies. People came to recognize me and would ask for help or the issue desk staff would see me and, if no other senior staff were at hand, send students with inquiries to me.

I catalogued over the full range of material, except for science where it was felt that the sub-librarian with specialized knowledge needed to do it. One of my first major jobs was to catalogue most of the books from the old Magee College collection and integrate them into the library stock. Once again, as at the National Library, I enjoyed working through a collection and it proved a good way of encountering all the Library of Congress schedules. Later I worked through a collection of books acquired from a distinguished medieval historian. Much of
this was interesting in itself and also I appreciated the sense cataloguers should enjoy of adding to their institution’s resources and to the tasks it could perform. I value the discipline I acquired through the endless checking of the library catalogue and also through checking the volumes of the National Union Catalogue for LC class numbers or, later, through years of HMSO catalogues. I had been a rather dreamy child and student and badly needed these exercises in patient concentration. From the subject librarians whom I worked for I learnt about the exhilaration of collection building, not just in the mechanical sense of supplying what was required for teaching purposes but in creating a body of material that had its own unity and that even apart from teaching needs it was the library’s responsibility to hold. For example, Margaret Vowles, the humanities sub-librarian had spent much of her working life in Southern Africa. She took a keen interest in the writers who merged from the recently independent African countries and saw that they were well represented. The library also had a fine Icelandic collection acquired by Benedict Benedicz, a former sub-librarian, an Icelander himself and a fine scholar, with a grant he obtained from the Icelandic government. Even if collection building was not something I could do much of at this early stage of my career, it became one of the activities I was working towards. I also catalogued books in German, mostly literature, and since, as it turned out, I was not to do much literary librarianship in my career, I was later glad to have had this experience.

Gradually, my public experience, which had so far been limited, expanded. During term we worked one evening a week on the issue desk. I was introduced to administrative routines and inquiries. On one of my first stints a student appeared at the desk with an index volume of Chemical Abstracts and asked for help in finding one abstract. Inwardly I quaked and was once again grateful to CLW where I had at least seen Chemical Abstracts before! The only word of the title I could understand was ‘copper’ and it was followed by an alphabetical code. I heard my voice giving some sort of guidance. The young man went on his way apparently happy and I reflected if he was enterprising enough to find the reference he should find the abstract itself. “You sounded terribly confident”, the library assistant on the desk with me said. With greater experience I would have admitted my limited knowledge to the young man and accompanied him back to the Chemical Abstracts and satisfied myself that he found what he was looking for. I hope, because of or in spite of me, he went on to a distinguished scientific career.

In the light of this it was sensible of Patrick Teskey to give me time to settle in before starting me on the library’s official publications collection. First through cataloguing new non-parliamentary publications I became familiar with the headings for departments and other official bodies. After about eight months Patrick introduced me to the various sets of Parliamentary Papers and the indexes to them. There was too much of this material to be catalogued and the job of an official publications specialist was to know how to use the various finding aids. As well as an extensive set of Northern Ireland parliamentary publications in hard copy, backed up by a microfilm set, The Library held all House of Commons, House of Lords and Command Papers from the Parliamentary session of 1968-69, when the university started and patchy
holdings of older material. It also held the Readex set of parliamentary papers on microcard. Few people under the age of fifty will have seen microcards. They were A5 sheets of plastic card with many pages of text photographed on to them, which could be read through remarkably user-friendly readers. They were for a period in the late 60s and 70s at the technological cutting edge. They were certainly easier to use than microfilm. NUU spent many thousands of pounds on microcard collections to cover large areas of stock. Within about 15 years they were completely useless. The technology was rapidly superseded, with the result that readers were no longer made. Soon it was difficult to find any that worked. I always remember them when I hear of any new development in technology.

My first complex official publications query came to me in November 1978. A retired history teacher from Omagh who was doing an MA in Irish history was looking for some House of Lords papers from the 1840s. I spent an afternoon searching through the microcards for them only to find they were not there. I felt somewhat ineffectual but she was extremely grateful and, such is the nature of Northern Ireland society, when she happened to meet my aunt in Omagh, whom she knew slightly, some weeks later, she told her how impressed she was by the way I had helped her! It taught me that people often appreciate concern and trouble taken on their behalf as much as results. I learnt more in my search for these papers than I would have in any other way. So I embarked on what has continued to be one of the main threads in my professional career. I learnt to find my way through the HMSO catalogues and other sources such as the Ford select lists and breviate of British Parliamentary Papers and Maltby's catalogue and breviate of Northern Ireland Parliamentary Papers.

Through my work with the official publications (and also with the small collection of post-1921 Irish official publications) I got to know many of the students and staff over a variety of disciplines. I learnt the basic details about legislation, although the university did not have a law school and my knowledge in this area more properly belongs to my time in Stormont. Early in 1979 I began my first extensive piece of professional writing, a guide to our official publications holdings. This appeared in the next academic year. My career had been shaped more than I realized, as the work I was doing led to my appointment at Stormont.

**Becoming chartered:**
From the start of my appointment at SELB I had been amassing professional experience towards my chartering. I was fortunate enough to be able to do this under the old rules of the Library Association, where one did not have to complete a training programme or submit work. I would say in defence of the old regime that it was not in any sense a box-ticking exercise. One achieved chartership after solid work experience (and it was necessary to state the work that had been done), which was seen as building on the completion of a course of training approved by the Library Association. So in May 1979 I became a chartered librarian, an Associate of the Library Association - and so I stayed until the day I woke up to find myself an MCLIP! Of course my process of becoming a librarian was far from complete, as was brought home to me three years later when, with no background in administration whatever I found myself having in
effect to manage. By this time I had made biggest and most unexpected adjustment of all. In May 1979 I, and most people round me, assumed that I would have spent my working life in universities. Yet within three years I had made a move I would never have expected and spent the rest of my career away from the academic field. However chartership seems a good point to draw a line under this survey- and nor try further the patience of any reader who has stuck with me this far!

**Changed, Changed Utterly:**

Had I written the above in 1990 looking back to a career starting in the late fifties, while undoubtedly major changes had taken place, there would still have been continuities and the professional world of librarians would not have become the radically different place it is today. Young librarians then would recognize the earlier world in a way that will probably be incomprehensible to their present-day successors.

I will start with the organizational changes. Trinity College, Dublin and the National Library of Wales still exist as they did when I was a part of them both although they have changed enormously. Of the other places discussed above none of them exist as the bodies they were then. The Sheffield University Department of Education became part of a larger school of education. The training of graduates to be teachers is only one of its functions. The College of Librarianship Wales was wound up and subsumed into the university as a Department of Library and Information Studies and later the word 'library' disappeared from its title. The Southern Education and Library Board no longer exists as a library authority, being replaced by a single authority for all public libraries in Northern Ireland. The New University of Ulster ceased to exist in 1984, being absorbed into the University of Ulster, with several campuses. The various legal and other changes that overtook my major employer, the Northern Ireland Assembly, are beyond my scope here.

Political change is behind many of these processes. The pivotal point is the election of the Conservative government in 1979, although in fact it took a long time for the changes to work through and, as I have indicated, the process of financial retrenchment had already started under the Callaghan government. In retrospect one incident seems like the end of an era. Early in 1979 someone who was a member of a Northern Ireland library authority (not the SELB) told us that they had approved the playing of piped Christmas carols in all the branch libraries that year. She personally thought this was a waste of money. I would be very surprised if the carols materialized when Christmas 1979 actually came- or if the proposal was ever made again! Change went far beyond spending cutbacks. The public sector world created after 1945, and actively maintained and developed by administrations of different parties, was decisively rejected. Business became the model for society, so that libraries and universities, consciously or unconsciously, based themselves on what was appropriate for supermarkets. Information is now seen as a commodity. At least a generation has known no other model. It is not my intention here to be nostalgic or to say that 'then' was always better than 'now'. What I have tried to do is to show how
the post-war world looked to one of its children and to describe it to those who did not know it.

Coterminous with these changes have been developments in technology, getting more radical as the decades have passed. All I would say here is that I am glad to have learnt my professional skills in the days before electronic media. One learnt to be careful and patient, to build up a knowledge of sources and to be flexible in their use. Would I have learnt the same lessons if I had always been able to get some sort of answer through a keyboard? Would I have been able to recognize deficiencies in the keyboard’s answer and discovered how to rectify the situation? I do not know but I am skeptical. For me printed texts supply context, how different parts relate to each other, in a way no electronic source can. I can still find an excitement or a potential in a shelf of books I can never find in a database.

So I conclude this account of an era. By 1979 I had apparently moved far from the world of the National Library of Wales. I may write about my later career but it is harder to do this without being justificatory or confessional. However my last task for the Assembly Library brought a curious closing of the circle. I catalogued a collection of older printed books. Thanks to the electronic revolution the English Short Title Catalogue can be maintained as an online listing of every book printed in English or in the English-speaking world up to 1800. I identified nine books in our stock not in ESTC and had them added. In 1975 contributing in this way to knowledge of the printed word in the English language would have seemed something beyond my wildest dreams to aspire to. I hope Llinos Davies would have been proud!

GEORGE WOODMAN

14 May 2013