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Norman Horrocks-Scarecrow Press

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Interview with Norman Horrocks

Editor, Teacher, Librarian <nhorro@is.dal.ca>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <strauchk@cofc.edu>

ATG: You have had a long and distinguished career in the library profession in many different countries and have worked in teaching and publishing, but your life started quite differently. Can you give us a little background on yourself?

NH: I was born in Manchester, England. My father worked in city government there (he started at the age of 14). He retired at the age of 65 and never understood why I didn't follow in his footsteps. My professional career started in England but I have worked in Cyprus, Australia, the United States (Pittsburgh, PA, Hawaii and New Jersey) and Canada with side visits to Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Jamaica, Taiwan, and several European countries. I look on it with immense satisfaction having met and known some incredible people over the years. Three years were spent as a part-time front-of-house manager for a professional repertory theater.

ATG: When did you decide to get into libraries?

NH: In 1943 and following in slightly different footsteps from my father. It was with the Manchester Public Libraries.

ATG: But then the war intervened?

NH: Yes. From 1943-45 I worked in the Central Library with evenings spent in Civil Defense — fire watching, i.e., guarding the library against the threat of incendiary bombs landing on the building. It was a different form of library conservation in those days!

From 1945-1948 I worked for military intelligence and spent three years in Egypt, Palestine, and Cyprus. I got earmarked for military intelligence because I knew French and German, I played chess, did crossword puzzles in the *Manchester Guardian*, and I was a librarian. After two years at library school in Manchester on the British equivalent of the G.I. Bill, I became British Council librarian in Cyprus helping with library services for the island.

ATG: What was it like in Cyprus? You were in Nicosia?

NH: There was a great contrast between the Greek and Turkish cultures on the island which was reflected in their approach to libraries. The Greek communities favored open access and the democratic approach to their collections. The Turkish communities venerated the book as a symbol of learning and culture to be guarded and admired.



It was the time of unrest on the island as the Greek majority sought "Enosis," union with Greece. Crowds gathered regularly in Metaxas Square to demonstrate against the British colonial government. The British Council Library was one of the focal points as it was in Metaxas Square, in the town center. In his book, *Bitter Lemons*, Lawrence Durrell (one of our library users at that time) describes the horrible glow in that square one night when the library with its 25,000 books was burned to the ground. That was the best English library on the island and I was assigned to restart it. It was not to be, because I was injured in a bomb meant for the governor of the island and spent six months in treatment at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London.

ATG: Then what?

NH: I decided I needed to look for a different place to work! I went to Perth in Western Australia when they were just developing from scratch a new library system for the state which covers a million square miles. Here I took my university degree in constitutional history — hence my later and current interest in parliamentary practice — and began part-time teaching of future librarians in the State.

A few seven years in Australia I was in need of updating my professional skills so I took a "long service leave" and enrolled in the then new library school at the University of Pittsburgh. I was a Teaching Fellow for a year which meant I taught in the mornings and took classes for my MLS in the afternoons. I was asked to stay on the faculty and in addition to teaching I

enrolled in the Ph.D. program. I married Sandy, a librarian (in the best tradition) who taught in the library school there in Pittsburgh. In those days nepotism was a no-no, so Sandy decided she'd stay home on a temporary basis.

ATG: When you finished with your Ph.D., you ended up in Canada?

NH: There was a new library school opening up at Dalhousie in Halifax and I became assistant director. When the director fell ill, I became director with a two year contract that ended up lasting fifteen years!

ATG: And you left teaching for publishing?

NH: Not exactly. In 1986 **Scarecrow Press** made me an offer I couldn't refuse, but teaching is in my blood. I continued to teach part time at **Rutgers** and now that I have returned to Canada, editing and consulting for Scarecrow, I am back at Dalhousie teaching there part-time.

ATG: Tell us about *Scarecrow*. It was started by **Ralph Shaw**?

NH: Yes, and, coincidentally, when I taught Summer School at Hawaii Ralph gave me the use of his office as he left for a visit to the "mainland." Ralph was a problem-solver who wouldn't take "no" for an answer. He thought there was a place for a publisher of short run titles of value to the library market which could result in a profit to the publisher and the payment of royalties to the authors. The first titles were edited by Ralph with the texts photo-reproduced from pages typed by women in their homes. Dust jackets were not provided — another cost reduction — because reference book jackets were commonly discarded upon receipt of the books by libraries. Another reason for no jackets was that the books were not displayed in book stores but sold by direct mail. Describing his plans to a friend at a university press, he was told that his lack of a fixed office (to reduce costs again) and the lean organizational processes meant that he was proposing a "scarecrow" of an operation. From this came the company name with the addition of a mortar board to the logo to reflect the scholarly emphasis of its titles.

The business expanded and when Ralph's health deteriorated the company was sold to **Grolier**, which some years later was itself sold to **Hachette** of Paris. It was never really a good fit with its new owners

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and in 1995 it was sold again and moved from Metuchen, New Jersey to Lanham, Maryland. Here it has found a home with other imprints and the owners of **National Book Network (NBN)**. NBN is a trade supplier which means that Scarecrow can now offer to its authors trade sales alongside its traditional library market.

Ralph Shaw was President of ALA and Scarecrow has always had librarians in charge of its operations. **Eric Moon**, another ALA President, succeeded Ralph, **Bill Eshelman**, **Al Daub** (whose father **Albert Daub** was company President at the time of the sale to Grolier), myself and now **Shirley Lambert**, a Simmons graduate.

ATG: You say Al Daub followed his father at Scarecrow; how about your children?

NH: No — none of our five children have expressed interest in either librarianship or publishing. Maybe I'll have more success with our grandchildren!

ATG: You have an incredible sweep of perspective on the profession. What are some of the things that you can share with us?

NH: The guiding principles of acquisition, organization and providing access remain essentially the same but the details of our work, what we do as librarians, is different these days.

For example, cataloging is basically the same, but I remember standard phrases which are now hopelessly dated — “library hand,” (handwriting) “secret pages,” (to show ownership of a book), “above the rod,” (filing catalog cards).

When I was in library school we used standard textbooks — books such as **Helen Haines** on book selection. Now things are changing so rapidly in so many areas that people are looking often for the quick fix. The demand for the more reflective approach seems to be less. We have been going through a period of “overselling” in our profession making things appear in an *either/or* situation. The lack of authority and the publishing tradition of refereeing and verification have been threatened by the world of the Internet. There are signs that this is now being recognized by users as well as librarians — the first stage towards seeking resolution of the problems.

The business world has had an impact on our libraries; words such as “accountability,” “outsourcing,” “fundraising,” “cost-benefit analysis” are now in our ev-

eryday vocabulary — not words I remember ever hearing when I began working in libraries — but then see how much the society in which libraries operate today has changed in the past fifty-five years also!

ATG: You are active in library associations all over the world and have been on ALA Council for 21 years. Can you give us old-timers some words of hope?

NH: I think we all need to support our professional organizations. Whether we can attend their conferences or not, we benefit from their services as our representatives to the outside community, from their research and publications, as well as their publicity on our behalf, etc. When I joined ALA in 1963, it was a time of political debates which gave way to procedural concerns. Professional issues followed and then concern for process took over. Since I left the Council three years ago, process has remained very much at the forefront, but I think these things do go in cycles. Ideas surface, disappear, then return again, often in a slightly different guise. It's called the carousel of ideas.

Woody Allen reportedly said, “Eighty-five percent of success is just showing up.” True enough, but the trick is to do something worthwhile when you do show up.



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