Against the Grain

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ATG Interviews Henry Owino, Manager, Collection Acquisition Services, Qatar National Library (QNL)

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Manager, Collection Acquisition Services, Qatar National Library (QNL)

by **Matthew Ismail** (Director of Collection Development, Central Michigan University Library) <ismailmd@cmich.edu>

Interviewer's Note: Since this interview was conducted, Mr. Owino has taken a new position at the *University of New England*. — MI

ATG: Can you tell us a bit about where you've worked during your career?

HO: For over several years I have worked in mainly academic library environments in Uganda, Australia, and United Arab Emirates. I am now on a major assignment at the **Qatar National Library (QNL)** as Manager for Collection Acquisition Services. My portfolio at QNL commenced with a broad oversight on Copyright and Licensing of information resources. I was responsible for the acquisition of print and electronic resources through firm ordering as well as blanket purchase programs and gifts and donations. I am a graduate of **RMIT University (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology)**, Melbourne, where I did my undergraduate and graduate studies in Librarianship and Information Management. I also hold an MA from **Loughborough University**, UK. The program at **Loughborough** prepared me for teaching in library and information services programs. But my initial Librarianship training was at the **East African School of Librarianship (EASL)** at **Makere University** in Kampala, Uganda.

ATG: Please tell us where you were born and where you grew up.

HO: I was born in the village of Mwenge in the Tororo district of Eastern Uganda. I grew up and undertook my primary school education not far from home. Then for high school I attended the first four years in a boys only school called **Bukedi College Kachonga**. I then went on to do the last two years Higher School Certificate in northern Uganda in a co-ed school then called **Boroboro Senior Secondary School** (but since reverted to its original name of **Dr. Obote College**). But my growing up was very rural based until I was 15 years then left home for boarding High School. I am the first son in a line of ten children (six sons and four daughters) raised up by parents who lived off subsistence agriculture.

ATG: How did you decide to become a librarian? What was in your background that prepared you for it?

HO: I might rightly describe myself as ... an accidental librarian ... But in my early school years once I had learned to read, I recall the lack of story books. All we had were graded school texts plus a few supplementary readers which were in each classroom. You got to read them only by permission and so a student whose family was able to buy them books became the friend of everyone. So we sometimes read the same books over and over. I recall in my junior secondary classes the **Uganda**

National Library Service commenced a Book Mobile service and they used to stop in the schools. My school was near the main road in the local trading center so we were able to take advantage and enroll with the mobile library but again you could only borrow one book on each visit. Those were the longest months of waiting as we often finished reading those books quickly but had to wait for the return of the grey Book Mobile. Sadly by 1966 the service stopped. You may ask how does this relate to my becoming a librarian? I did not set out to be a librarian only due to my love for reading. I wanted to be a lawyer but couldn't get into the law program at the only university for the country at the time. I then wanted to be a teacher and I did not get a place again due to stiff competition and the sheer large number of applicants. Now I was stuck and needed to do something, otherwise I was going to remain on the streets and not do anything beyond High School. But as I was visiting my uncle in the capital city I happened to be reading the newspaper and spotted an advertisement calling for applicants with High School passes to join the **EASL** for a two year program to become a librarian. The school was part of the national **University-Makerere** but catered for all of East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda at the time and there were only ten places for Ugandan students. I was amongst the ten that got chosen in the 1974 intake and that is how I ended up in the Library profession. Once enrolled in the course I sought to know all I could about the profession and what I can really do with the qualifications.

ATG: When did you decide to immigrate to Australia?

HO: The story is long but needs to be told to understand how and when I went to Australia. Following on my initial Librarianship training at **EASL**, I was appointed Assistant Librarian at the **National Business College**. I

quickly realized that the undergraduate library diploma awarded from **EASL** was insufficient and I needed to upgrade to a degree either in the same field or another area of study. I applied to several institutions across the globe in search for a college that would recognize my initial training and give some exemptions but also provide scholarship to undertake further training. This was also the time of the military Government of **Idi Amin** in Uganda and scholarships were extremely hard to come by. Soon after **Amin's** removal things changed and I got a part sponsorship from the Government of Uganda to undertake a conversion course in Australia at **RMIT University**. I took the opportunity and while in Australia got a full sponsorship to finish the four years program; after which I was to return to Uganda. I did and got a graduate fellowship at **Makerere University** and for a year taught undergraduate students of librarianship at **EASL** while awaiting an opportunity to undertake a master's program which was a prerequisite for appointment to full lecturer (professor). So a British Council sponsorship enabled me to go to **Loughborough** to undertake the Masters' in Librarianship. I returned to **EASL** in Autumn of 1986 and taught for a term. Towards the end of the year our application for permanent residence in Australia came through and we went through to Nairobi prepared to travel back to Australia which we did in February of 1987.

ATG: What brought you to Abu Dhabi?

HO: The adventures of international librarianship brought me to Abu Dhabi. A friend alerted me to an advertisement seeking a librarian with collections and acquisitions experience to support the development for a new engineering library at the **Petroleum Institute** in Abu Dhabi. I applied and got interviewed and at the time was told that I was over-qualified for the position. However, nearly a year later they came back to me and advised that the responsibility had been expanded and they would be keen to re-interview me for the position. I agreed to go for the interview but something really weird happened on my way to Abu Dhabi. We checked into an Emirates flight at the Tullamarine airport in Melbourne and sat ready to go and the plane was not moving. Half an hour later we were told the engine needed attention before we could go. An hour later they gave us dinner while we waited. Two hours later the flight was cancelled, and we were all put in buses to go to the Hilton Hotel. Now I was panicking. I had planned to arrive on a Saturday, rest and appear for the first day of the interview which was a Sunday. But now I had to ring ahead on Friday, a public holiday in the Gulf, to alert them that my flight was cancelled. I sent an email and fortunately my contact received it and by this time I had an internal flight arranged for the next day to fly

continued on page 42

to Perth in Western Australia and catch another flight Saturday to reach Dubai then go to Abu Dhabi by road. I got into my hotel, showered and changed then fronted for my first interview session barely awake. After two days in Abu Dhabi I travelled on a very foggy April morning to catch my flight back to Melbourne. There was a major accident and pile-up just half way to Dubai. I did not get held up but it is just part of the adventures of international librarianship. I was offered the position and came back to **Petroleum Institute** in June of 2008. Just for information this university trained engineering staff who then got absorbed to various operating companies attached to the **Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC)**.

ATG: To Doha?

HO: Towards the end of 2012 we all read about the exciting development in Qatar and the establishment of the **Qatar National Library**. It was an attractive prospect and most library professionals felt that it would be an honor and a privilege to be associated with such a project of the century. So when an opportunity availed itself, I applied and was interviewed for one of the technical services positions to Head the Acquisitions portfolio. At the end of February 2013, I arrived in Doha to commence work at the **Qatar National Library (QNL)**.

Qatar National Library

ATG: Tell us a bit about the Qatar National Library.

HO: The best description and highlight of the **Qatar National Library** is in the statement that sits on the official website... “**Qatar National Library** acts as a steward of Qatar’s national heritage by collecting, preserving and making available the country’s recorded history. In its role as a research library with a preeminent heritage library, the Library fosters and promotes greater global insight into the history and culture of the Gulf region. As a public library, we provide equal access for all of Qatar’s residents to an environment that supports creativity, independent decision-making, and cultural development. Through all our functions, we provide leadership to the country’s library and cultural heritage sector. The Library also supports Qatar’s transition from a reliance on natural resources to become a diversified and sustainable economy by providing support to students, researchers,

and the public to promote lifelong learning and empower individuals and communities for a better future.”

In one sentence all I can say is it is a masterpiece and an outstanding outcome in every aspect. The best so far and I believe that everyone needs to make it a point to visit and experience this space and the services.

ATG: What was your biggest challenge in readying the QNL for the official opening?

HO: There were several aspects and perspectives in readying the **QNL** for the official opening. Some people felt more pressure towards the opening day, for others it was pressure applied from several years earlier. From the perspective of collections, I would like to refer you to a paper presented at the **2016 Charleston Conference** which gives a detailed description of the preparations and readying the **ODC — Opening Day Collections**. (Owino, Dudek, 2016.)

I was responsible for the Acquisition of titles selected by both approval plans and firm orders. And once paid for the books were stored overseas as the library building was not ready and we did not, at that time, have an appropriate storage facility locally in Doha. By late 2015 the central storage location in Qatar became available and **QNL** was able to commence making a significant use of the state-of-the-art storage facility. Several large containers of books (with several pallets) were shipped at various times through 2016. The books were then delivered, and stored awaiting move to the new **QNL** building.

Within Our Directorate of Content and Access the planned move of the materials from the central QF storage and shelving of the materials in the new building was undertaken by the Director, Head of Access, Head of Cataloguing and Head of Acquisitions (myself) who worked through tenders for the shelving companies to support the project. In the end the move of the collection and shelving was done through a combination of a British Shelving Company — **Specialized Movers** from Sheffield — a local company called **Gulf Warehousing Company, (GWC Logistics)** in short **GWCL**, and the Content and Access Service (Our own directorate) with a support crew employed for the shelving process. Our own in-house staff shelved the Children’s and Teens’ Library collection of over 135,000 items in a period of one month between April and May 2017.

The Shelving Company and logistics staff from **GWCL** in Doha did a splendid job. **GWCL** ensured the prompt delivery of pallets from QF warehouse while the **Specialized Movers** staff ensured the shelving progressed as planned. Our challenge was keeping up the shelving company as they easily exceeded their set target of 10,000 books a day! In the beginning too the actual shelving plan for the tiers

was a challenge and the Head of Cataloguing spent many hours on this and the only technical challenge was ...unblocking the Book Sorter whenever it got stuck. In all the companies finished their task well ahead of time on 14th August 2017 with 609,251 books shelved in the general collection tiers and compact shelves. Of course, there are other parts of the **QNL** collection, namely the Heritage collection, that were moved through another contractor as this required even more specialized handling, but all was finalized in time.

ATG: Has the mission of the Qatar National Library changed over the years?

HO: The current Mission of **QNL** as stated on the official site is... “to spread knowledge, nurture imagination, cultivate creativity and preserve the nation’s heritage for the future.

QNL will achieve its mission by creating and sustaining an intuitive and trusted information environment in a culturally and technologically superior setting and by developing innovative programs and services.”

Previously **QNL** started as a project of the **Qatar Foundation** as a central library to serve the **Qatar Foundation** community. In April 2012, the project was renamed “Qatar National Library” whose mission was three pronged: to function as National Library, University and Research Library and Metropolitan public library of the digital age (Medawar, Tabet, 2016). In 2017 in an interview for *Insight* I made the following comment “... We are all very curious how the **QNL** will be received by the people of Qatar. It is our hope that this building will become a global center for information, knowledge and technology but also will invigorate the imagination of the people with the creative possibilities of good design. Above all, it is a great pleasure to work in such a multicultural and international environment, with all experienced librarians. It helps finding an inspiration to achieve goals, succeed in everyday work, and think creatively and finally to grow professionally.” I was not wrong as today I come to the building on any day of the week — and it is completely full of very enthusiastic clients of all ages patronizing the services and enjoying the state of the art facilities.

ATG: How does your professional experience in the Middle East differ from that in Australia?

HO: As I look back on the last ten years I am challenged in the following arenas:

1. I think of professional titles assigned to trainees without the professional qualifications in the hope that they will attain the necessary experience or will eventually have formal qualifications to match those titles.
2. “On the job training ...” takes on a new meaning when you have a tight deadline and an official opening looming. You do everything in your power to help the colleagues under your mentorship to get the best outcome.

continued on page 43

Interview — Henry Owino
from page 42

3. Having a fairly diverse cultural mix of qualified librarians from all continents of the world calls for a lot of patience and a desire to learn from each other; being respectful; adapting the experiences and skills and being able to fulfil the set objectives.
4. Professions have a way of being interpreted with a cultural twist and this tends to color interpretations, training and expectations both in Australia and more so in the recent two countries I have lived outside of Australia.

I would not want to over-generalize my comparison between Australia and the Middle East. Both areas boast of having multi-cultures, but the significant decisions are taken at levels that identify with very specific cultural taints. In Australia it is Anglo-American influence while in the Middle East it is a selection of the best options sifted through a local cultural base. In today's environment I dare say that the professional experience in the Middle East is exposed to a much wider influence from the many expatriates while the Australian is focused on the locally developed workforce with minimal international impact. Anyone coming to join the library profession in Australia acclimatizes to the Australian way while the Middle East picks from the best of the expatriates.

ATG: *How has the City of Doha changed in the years you've been there?*

HO: Doha has indeed transformed in the six years I have been here. A lot of work has gone into the roads and other infrastructure and there is a substantial change. I am sure that if one goes away for a year and returns to Doha they will need to use a guide to find their way around the city and services. That is how fast and significantly Doha has changed!

ATG: *You've lived in a few different countries. Where do you consider home?*

HO: I have visited many countries; I have lived in a few but I would say home is the country where I have spent most of my time. So let's see — from least time to longest; United Kingdom (Loughborough); United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi); Qatar (Doha); Uganda (my birth place) and longest is Australia. So, definitely Australia is Home.

References

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Obituary — Amanda Lou Harmon

Amanda Lou Harmon passed away July 19, 2019. She moved to Charlotte from Bradford, PA in 1970, bringing her beloved horse "Pig" with her. During her early years in Charlotte she was active in the area hunter/jumper horse community. Due to her affection for her horse Pig, she amassed an extensive collection of equine and porcine décor — pictures, figurines, and especially pig Christmas ornaments.

Amanda was a woman of varied interests. She liked sports, particularly equestrian events, ice skating, the Olympics, and UNCC 49er basketball. She held Charlotte Symphony season tickets for a number of years, attended theater around Charlotte on a regular basis, and had a special love for Broadway musicals. **Amanda** always looked forward to her week at the beach with a group of friends, a trip she made on an annual basis for almost 40 years. She was an enthusiastic and appreciative dinner guest. **Amanda** held degrees from **Syracuse University** and **UNC Charlotte**. She retired from **UNC Charlotte's J. Murrey Atkins Library** in 2011 after 40 years of service. Most of that time was spent as Head of Acquisitions at the Library, during which she led the department through many major changes as automation took place.

Amanda is survived by her niece, **Cory Harmon Holst (Mark)** of Castle Pines, CO, and nephews **Scott Harmon** of Palm Bay, FL, and **Glenn Harmon** of Acworth, GA. She was predeceased by her brother **John O. Harmon, Jr.** and her parents **Bertha Redfield** and **John O. Harmon, Sr.** She leaves behind many special friends and her cats Pearl and Cosette.

Burial will be in Bradford, PA at a later date. Donations may be made to the Charlotte Humane Society, 2700 Toomey Ave., Charlotte, NC 28203. Online condolences may be shared through www.tallentfuneralservice.com. Published in *Charlotte Observer* on July 20, 2019. 🌿