

NEVER FAR FROM BOOKS AND THEIR USERS

DONALD HERBERT SIMPSON

1920-2002



With the death of Donald Simpson on 4 November 2002, SCOLMA has lost one of its founding fathers and the library world a great exemplar of that now-endangered species, the scholar librarian. Apart from a brief, initial experience in Middlesex Public Libraries, an experience curtailed by the Second World War, Donald was a one-library librarian. Indeed, for generations of scholars, students and colleagues, Donald was the Royal Empire (later Commonwealth) Society Library. Jan Morris, who generously acknowledged Donald's assistance with the *Pax Britannica* trilogy wrote in support of the RCS Library Appeal in the *Times literary supplement* (11 October 1985):

"There can be few people who know more about the British Empire than D.H. Simpson. He is as interested in, say, the rules of cricket as in Ibo marriage rites or in the treaties governing Indian sovereignty in Alberta...Mr Simpson has set an unmistakable personal stamp upon the RCS Library and has encouraged its use by students of all kinds, from schoolchildren working on projects to professors concluding standard works".

His war service, which Donald always described as "completely undistinguished" and which was ended prematurely by rheumatic fever, gave him his first taste of Africa and the wider world. Posted to Malta he travelled the long way round via Sierra Leone, the Cape and Aden. It was thus, with his geography and international awareness improved by the war, that he joined the Royal Empire Society as Senior Assistant in 1945. He learned about the Library's stock the hard way. The Library had been hit by a bomb in the blitz and his early years were spent checking lists of war losses and their replacements and clearing the debris. No suitable covering could be found for his tall frame and an overall of the Librarian's wife, tied round the waist like an apron, had to suffice. This early experience stood him in good stead since the Library, situated as it was in an antiquated, poorly maintained building, was subject throughout the next half century to floods, fires and leaks. In the days before the term "disaster planning" was on every librarian's lips, Donald always knew what to do.

He was soon promoted to Deputy Librarian and in 1956, in time to preside over the reopening of the restored Library and a royal visit, to Librarian, succeeding James Packman. With a characteristic combination of modesty and wry humour, Donald described in his valedictory lecture 31 years later, the circumstances of his promotion:

"At the time of his [Packman's] departure, the Library was packed up in boxes (which had once held kibbled onions, a term whose meaning I have never ascertained) as the war damage repair work at last reached the Library floor. I...was appointed Librarian (since no one else would know how to put it all back)".

He was however very conscious of his place in the "apostolic succession" - only the fifth Librarian in the Society's history, determined to preserve and hand on what had been entrusted to him

Donald's output and achievement over the next three decades is amazing, especially considering that even in the good years the Library was under-resourced, often valued more outside its parent institution than within it. There were major publications: *Biography Catalogue of the Royal Commonwealth Society* (1961), *Manuscript Catalogue of the Library of the Royal Commonwealth Society* (1975), *Drawings by William Westall* (edited jointly with T.M. Perry, 1961) and the book, which brought him most pleasure and recognition in select scholarly circles, *Dark Companions: the African contribution to the European Exploration of East Africa* (1975). This last combined meticulous, scholarly detective work with an innovative interest in the role of Africans in a story previously seen almost entirely from a Eurocentric perspective. And there was much more. I have in my possession a 24-page listing of his writings, compiled by Donald at the end of his career. The Africana section alone (which we hope to publish in a future issue of *ARD*) takes up 9 pages. There were numerous book reviews and editorial introductions. Above all there was the unbroken run of 282 *Library Notes* which grew out of the Library's accessions list to include short (and not so short - *Charles Dickens and the Empire* ran to 27 pages) articles. Sometimes these described particularly interesting or quirky items within the Library; sometimes they narrated and interpreted the history of the Library and Society, sometimes they provided the first (which was sometimes also the last) word on a topic of Commonwealth history. Many of these were dictated at breakneck speed to a series of long-suffering secretaries. They needed and acquired gifts of interpretation. Donald's drafts were normally literal scissors and paste jobs with small slips of paper covered with near indecipherable handwriting. He could however type at amazing speeds with two fingers and in later life, to universal relief, began to master the word-processor.

To those who remember Donald only as a revered elder statesman, it should be stressed how much of an innovator and initiator he was. He saw the value and interest of ephemera long before this was fashionable. He was one of the first to realise the importance of photographs and visual images for African and Imperial history and promoted the cataloguing and publicising of the Library's collection. He was generous with his time and knowledge and there are few major works on Commonwealth or Imperial history written between the fifties and eighties of the 20th century which do not acknowledge his assistance. Too many to list here, Jan Morris's *Pax Britannica* trilogy must stand for them all.

The Library was his base but also his springboard to a wider world of Area Studies and Commonwealth involvement. He was, although he would have disliked the word, a great networker. As already mentioned he was one of

SCOLMA's founding fathers, a member of the original committee, Chairman 1964-1968 and 1973-1977, and editor, 1964-1970, of *Library materials on Africa* which evolved into *African research & documentation*. Africanists may not be aware that he played a similar role in Canadian studies. A founder member of the British Association for Canadian Studies (BACS), he was President from 1984 to 1986, a unique honour for a librarian, and the founding Convener of its Library and Resources Group from 1981 until 1989. The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies also looks to him as one of its founding fathers. He served on the Council of the Hakluyt Society and on the library committees of the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

John McIlwaine writes later of his 17 years as external examiner at the University College School of Library, Archive and Information Studies. His interest in training the future profession went back a long way. His first published article was on "Students' Problems (A.A.L. Revision School, 5 May 1940)" in the *Library Assistant*, June 1940. He trained relatively few library assistants and deputies because those he did have tended to stay a long time. (When I joined Donald's staff in 1980, I thought it would be an interesting job for a year, then I would seek something more lucrative; I stayed with the Library for twenty years). If at first he was awe-inspiring, even intimidating, in his seeming omniscience about the Library's resources and in his high standards, he was soon recognised as an inspiring mentor, to whom his staff were devoted. I wish I could remember the day I was first allowed to call him "Donald"; to most staff and Library users he remained always "Mr Simpson." But beneath the slight reserve, the old-fashioned courtesy, there was a warm personality, a caring heart (if he did not always suffer fools gladly, lame ducks did rather better) and a sense of fun. He was a brilliant mimic and could reduce his junior staff to hysterics by imitating particularly irritating or eccentric readers or by describing how he cheated at Bridge because his mother-in-law must always be allowed to win.

His professional life was enriched and enlivened by his life outside work. Or was it the other way round? His wife, Patricia, loyally supported his many activities and endeared herself to his staff by visiting with cream cakes, especially in times of crisis, to which the Library was increasingly prone in the late eighties. One former library assistant recalled at Donald's funeral, that Patricia would come in, regard the heaps of paper and books on his office floor with quiet despair and say, "If I were you, Pauline, I'd just take a few things from the bottom layer and dispose of them quietly. He'll never notice. That's what I do at home". And he didn't even though we sometimes thought he knew the precise location of every book in the Library without looking it up. The Library meant a great deal to him but it never took over the place in his life that belonged to his family (his two daughters Pauline and Madeleine), his church and his local community. He lived in or near Twickenham all his life and local history was a passion (accounting for another four pages of his list of publications). He joined the local Wolf Cubs as a boy and only retired from active scouting in 1981, having volunteered to help run

the Scout troop for six months when they were shorthanded in 1947. His commitment to St. Mary's Church, Twickenham, began in childhood and for most of his life he worshipped there, tending its records, archives and monuments, serving on numerous committees and as Churchwarden. His strong faith underpinned all that he was and did.

Donald entitled his valedictory lecture, delivered in December 1987, *From the Librarian's Desk: a personal view of forty years of Commonwealth studies*. He concluded:

"I am grateful that I have had such a diversity of interests in forty years of satisfying work. There have been problems, most of them stemming directly or indirectly from the financial stringencies of trying to run a scholarly library on the inadequate income of a private learned society, but many compensations. Unlike most of my colleagues in senior positions, who spend their time in administration, inter-departmental committees, staff negotiations, etc., I have never moved far from books and their users, which, to me are what make librarianship rewarding...*The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea I have a goodly heritage*". [Psalm 16:6]

Sadly, that goodly heritage was threatened in the years that followed. Donald retired before the gathering storm clouds finally overtook the Royal Commonwealth Society Library. He watched, with pain, but without reproaches, as the Library came close to sale and dispersal. He gave willingly of his time and expertise to the campaign to save the Library and then in preparing for the move to Cambridge and visiting it in its new location. Patricia's death in 1995 was a grievous loss but he bore it with characteristic faith and fortitude and was fully engaged on a number of fronts when he suffered a serious accident with pelvic and brain injuries in the following year. He never recovered his powers of speech and communication and his last years were a curious half-life. Pauline and Madeleine made it possible for him to be cared for in his own home, with peace and dignity, and visitors and carers were treated to the occasional glimpse of the "old Donald".

Peter Freshwater, writing for the Canadianist community, which with many overlapping scholarly communities was so well served by Donald, concluded his tribute in words that speak for us all.

"Donald Simpson's death severs a link with a past world which prized meticulous excellence in its research and teaching, especially in connecting researchers and students with their resources and with each other. For that quality of life above all else, we miss him"

Terry Barringer.

Donald Simpson was Chairman of SCOLMA when I first joined the Committee in the mid-1970s, but we already knew one another well in a different context. At the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies, University College London, I had taken over in 1966 the optional course in the postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship "Oriental and African bibliography" which had been devised and taught since its inception in 1959 by Jim Pearson. The term of the external examiner I inherited from Jim, Ken Gardner of the British Museum Library, came to an end in 1968 and I knew who I wanted as successor and asked Donald if he would take on the task. He was immediately interested: as Terry Barringer notes above, he was always happy to be involved in professional training; but he gently reminded me that he had himself no degree (this was some years before his honorary M.A. from Edinburgh). In those far-off days I was able to say no matter: if I said that he was the best man for the job the University would accept it. So began for me a long and very fruitful relationship. External examiners were only supposed to serve for four years, but Donald was far too valuable for me to lose him, and because this was a time when new courses with an "area study" element were regularly being founded in our Department: a Masters in Library studies, another Masters in Overseas Archive Studies, I was able to get him seamlessly appointed to be external for each new course, without of course him abandoning his connections with those he was already involved with. Eventually I managed to hold on to him for no less than 17 years.

Donald was the ideal external. He combined rigorous academic standards with a genuine concern for those being examined, and always put the student first. He also always kept to deadlines. Together we set papers (Donald was always happy to make suggestions for new questions, or new slants for old questions, drawing upon the experiences with area-study groups outlined by Terry Barringer above), read essays and marked examination papers and dissertations from students from over 70 different countries. We early developed a habit of having our examiners meetings over lunch at the Calabash Restaurant at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden. This had the twin advantages of being about equidistant in walking from the RCS and from UCL and serving lunch at such a leisurely pace that we were easily able to conclude our business. It was also an appropriate venue, for many of the students we were examining came from Africa: probably over 50% of all the non-U.K. students. Donald strove hard for the students: having been critical of their syntax, their grasp of facts and their insight, he would then be happy to detect redeeming features. It so happened that the very first student we examined on our new Master's course had to be failed first time round: I can still remember the heart-searching that was needed before we reluctantly agreed on this, and Donald's genuine pleasure when the candidate was successful second time around (and went on to a distinguished career).

I would like to think that Donald derived some interest from his work with the School: it certainly did not make him rich, and I can remember him saying that one particularly delayed cheque from the University was hardly worth

depositing but would be interesting to have framed in his office. He was polite enough to say that he enjoyed the connection and that it gave him ideas for contributions to *Library notes*: he was always prepared to receive visits at the RCS Library and show round students following the various area-study courses, and he was always interested in later years to see news of the career progress of students whom he remembered having met and later examined years before. The students in their turn were always impressed by his gravitas and his grasp of the dimensions and detail of the RCS collections, which even a short visit could communicate to them. Indeed his imposing height, immaculate dress and splendidly modulated tones made an instant impression on all meeting him for the first time, quickly followed by admiration for his encyclopaedic knowledge of Commonwealth matters to which Terry Barringer has several times alluded above. Pat Larby, for whom Donald was the first of five Chairmen under whom she would eventually serve as Secretary of SCOLMA, recalls how often she and many others found that the quickest way to answer a query was to "ask Donald". She remembers how at one SCOLMA meeting someone referred to a rumour that Jomo Kenyatta had been an extra in the film *Sanders of the river*. Everyone turned to Donald, to ask if this was true. Donald said yes it was. End of query.

I think that we made a good partnership over the 17 years. Soon after we started working together we moved happily on to the greater intimacy of "Dear McIlwaine" and "Dear Simpson" (probably the last colleague with whom I enjoyed this form of address) and it was with genuine regret that Donald eventually said "I suppose in this modern world we should really move on to Christian names now". He ran SCOLMA Committee meetings with a brisk level of formality which ensured that everyone was heard and felt included, yet allowed decisions to be firmly reached and implemented, and trains caught. SCOLMA was close to his heart and he chronicled it assiduously: his "Fifteen years of SCOLMA", *ARD*, 13, 1977, 1-6 remains the essential starting point for all later accounts. At SCOLMA's Silver Jubilee Conference Dinner in 1987, he delivered a cheerful and witty speech (later reproduced in *ARD*, 44, 1987, 20-22) on SCOLMA matters grave and light-hearted. He finished by saying "I hope you will invite me to your fiftieth anniversary": sadly the accident that robbed him of a decent retirement and all his colleagues of the opportunity to continue to profit from his wisdom and experience meant that he was not able to attend our fortieth anniversary in June 2002. He would have enjoyed it. At the 1987 dinner when he was introduced, the current Chairman, Peter Freshwater disdained the customary biographical notes and said simply, "to many of us Donald Simpson is SCOLMA".

John McIlwaine (with acknowledgements to Patricia Larby)

N.B. Donald Simpson's daughter has a number of copies of his work *Dark companions: the African contribution to the European exploration of East Africa*. London, Elek, 1975, and will be happy to supply these on request. Contact <paulesimpson@ukgateway.net>