

OBITUARY

Professor J.D.PEARSON

It is with great sadness that *ARD* must record the death of one of its founders and its very first Chairman. James Douglas ('Jim') Pearson died on 1st August 1997 at the age of 85.

As librarian of the School of Oriental and African Studies from 1950 to 1972 he became the best known and most influential of all librarians and bibliographers in the field of Oriental and African Studies in the United Kingdom. He not only oversaw the development of his own library from post-war confusion into one of the world's major specialist collections in its field, but he was also instrumental in setting up an apparently never ceasing series of initiatives involving other libraries. As noted above, he was one of the prime movers in the establishment of SCOLMA in 1962, and acted as its Chairman from 1962 to 1964. In 1967 he organised the Conference on the Acquisition of Library Materials from Asia held at SOAS, from which developed the various area-study library groups in the Asian Studies field, their overall co-ordinating body, currently named the National Council on Orientalist Library Resources (NCOLR) and the creation of the Union Catalogue of Asian Publications which was actually maintained at SOAS. As well as being Chairman of SCOLMA Jim chaired countless other regional studies groups, including the NCOLR in its days as the SCONUL Group of Orientalist Libraries, and took the chair at numerous conferences, of which the International Conference on African Bibliography in Nairobi, 1967 is perhaps the one that will come most readily to the minds of readers of this journal. For at least twenty years, no one would think of setting up a committee, holding a meeting, founding a journal or undertaking a publication in the field of Asian or African studies without saying 'we must get Jim involved'.

In addition to the work of bringing libraries and other institutions into more fruitful co-operation, there was the bibliographical work. Many around the world who never met him or ever visited England or SOAS will know his name from his publications. Most imperishable is probably *Index Islamicus*, for which he compiled the base-volume covering Western language articles on Islamic topics published between 1906 and 1955, published in 1958. Often cited simply as 'Pearson' this has been continued, initially by Jim himself, and is today the *Quarterly Index Islamicus*; it has been extended backwards in time and supplemented by Wolfgang Behn; and it has been used as a model by others – *Index Sinicus*, *Index Iranicus* and *Index Africanus*. But this was only the best known of many essential works. His *Oriental manuscripts in Europe and North America: a survey* (1971) was another pioneering work which the NCOLR are currently seeking to update. In the early 1960s he set up a project which involved creating guides to Western language archive and manuscript materials located throughout the British Isles. It was conceived totally independently of the similar series set up by Unesco and the International Council on Archives although characteristically Jim was happy to let the published volumes (4 published by Oxford University Press for SOAS, 1965-1979) be regarded as the UK contribution to the international enterprise, 'Guides to the sources for the history of nations'. The initial

compilation was carried out by Doreen Wainwright and Noel Mathews under Jim's supervision. The volume for Africa appeared in 1971. In his retirement, Jim returned to this series, and cheerfully began the massive task of updating it, volume by volume. He and his wife Hilda drove round the UK poking into local collections from regimental museums to county archives, painstakingly seeking relevant material. Two supplements to the volume on South and South-East Asia appeared in 1989/90 and a completely revised two volume version of the title for Africa appeared in 1993/94 (see reviews in *ARD*, 65, 1994, 42-43; 67, 1995, 30-31). He continued to work on revisions for the volumes on the Middle East and North Africa and on the Far East up till a few weeks before his death, and I am sure he would have hoped that someone would complete his work. He always believed in trying to supplement and continue really valuable existing publications: there was his extension to Theodore Besterman's work, *World bibliography of African bibliographies* (1975) and its companion in the Oriental field. Following his retirement in 1979 he completed a supplementary volume to Creswell's monumental *Bibliography of the art and architecture of Islam*, and an index to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* as well as the volumes on archives noted above.

Jim was a university librarian of the generation who believed in books (and manuscripts, archives and microforms: he was before the electronic revolution) and readers. I am sure that he sensed that he would be less than happy in the university world of strategic planning, performance indicators, research assessment exercises and similar manifestations of management, and he retired early as Librarian of SOAS to be a Senior Research Fellow and then Professor of Bibliography with reference to Asia and Africa.

As a person Jim had an immensely warm and friendly personality which quickly impressed itself on all cultures – travelling round the world one was always being asked for news of him by local librarians and archivists long after he had retired. He was totally straightforward and unassuming. He was always ready to tell an audience how he had left school at 16 to start working as a book-fetcher or 'library boy' in Cambridge University Library. A passion for languages including the oriental led to 'a scholarship being found for me at St. John's and later Pembroke College'. He returned to the University Library in 1936, and remained there apart from military service during the war, until his move to SOAS as Librarian in 1950. Always full of praise for work by others, he was happy to deprecate his own bibliographical work, claiming that he was simply filling gaps. 'Something (however imperfect) is better than nothing' he would say, claiming that if he compiled and published a bibliography in a field where none existed, then others would be encouraged to build upon it and improve it. When awarded the Bestermann Medal for his editorship of the *Handbook of South Asian bibliography* in 1980, he took great delight in drawing the attention of those present at the awards ceremony to an unfavourable review of the work which had been published by Maureen Patterson! He always happily referred to the 'bibliographical cottage industry' which he and Hilda set up in their Cambridge home following his retirement. The library world was sufficiently impressed by his achievements both before and during the 'cottage' period for the Library Association, who had made him an Honorary Fellow in 1976, to award him the Walford Prize for lifelong achievement in bibliography in 1992. I know Jim was pleased by these gestures; but he was just as

pleased by the many tributes paid to his help and encouragement in countless prefaces to bibliographical works published around the world.

To turn to more personal matters. In 1959 Jim was invited to teach a course in Oriental and African Bibliography at the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies at University College London, in recognition both of his own achievements in the field and of the increasing number of students from Asian and African countries who were attending the School. Arriving as a student at the School in 1961/62 I asked if I could take this particular option. The full-time staff of the School were dubious about its relevance to someone who was not actually from the regions concerned, but promised to ask Jim. At the beginning of term party, Jim swept over to me, introduced himself, and said he would be delighted to have a 'home' student with overseas interests – after all the Hayter Committee had just reported, with him supplying most of the material for its section on libraries, and he could no doubt see the expansion in area studies in UK universities which it was about to usher in. So began my continuing involvement in area studies librarianship and bibliography which among other things sees the continuation of what I still think of as 'Jim's course' at the School now taught by myself and in its 40th year. After he retired, Jim made over to me virtually all his files of cuttings and notes on bibliographical matters relating to Africa as well as many items in his collection of bibliographies, directories and the like and they have continued to supply a source for my own work. To quote from my *Writings on African archives* published last year (1996) which took as its point of departure two long articles by Jim published in *ARD* and its predecessor *Library materials on Africa* in 1973, 'I should like to acknowledge the lifelong efforts and enthusiasm of the man who provided the starting point for this whole bibliographical enterprise as for so many others ... [who] as my tutor in the early 1960s provided the stimulus and example for all the work I have done in area studies since'.

This has been a largely personal memoir of a man who was large enough both physically and professionally to need many other tributes. I hope that colleagues in SCOLMA and in the wider field of African studies as a whole will feel able to contribute comments and memories of Jim to future issues of *ARD*. Barry Bloomfield edited *Middle East studies and libraries: a felicitation volume for Professor J.D. Pearson* in 1980. This includes contributions from Bloomfield himself and from Donald Simpson, Tony Loveday and myself of past and present SCOLMA Committee members, and a bibliography of his writings to 1979. I hope that *ARD* may be able to publish an updated list of his writings on African matters.

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