



Photograph by Kt Bruce

## Profile

### Sarah Thomas

**Sarah Thomas was appointed as Librarian of the Bodleian Libraries (fondly known as 'Bodley') at the University of Oxford in February 2007, so, with the fifth anniversary of her appointment imminent, it seemed a good opportunity for *Insights* to catch up with her for a chat about her remarkable career so far.**

Much was made at the time of the fact that Sarah was the first woman and first non-British citizen to hold the position in 400 years. Your Editor began by asking whether she feels that this distinction has made a difference to the way that she has been perceived by colleagues in the academic community over the last five years, and whether the 'weight of history' sits heavy on her shoulders. "I am chastened by the responsibility of being Bodley's Librarian. It's so important to respect this organization ..." but, she added "... in the end, I think people treat me as an individual, and not as a representative of my gender or country. Of course, women, who have waited 400 years to see another woman in the role of Bodley's Librarian, are encouraged to see there's no barrier for their advancement. And, as we work in an increasingly interconnected, international environment, perhaps the choice of an American for an institution with global horizons was not so startling."

It is clear that this is a role Sarah has embraced and taken in her stride, but she remains very aware of the prestigious nature of the job. "Being Bodley's Librarian is very special because of the age of the Library, its fabulous collections, and Oxford's complexity", but, "that being said, I've worked at Harvard, and Harvard's library is only a few decades younger than the Bodleian, and at the Library of Congress (LC), a copyright library whose collections are much larger than those of the Bodleian." Sarah seemed unfazed by the scale of the role. "At LC, I 'managed' 800 cataloguers, and that was so challenging that nothing has fazed me since" she went on to explain. "The Bodleian is unique, but I draw on my past experiences all the time

"Nothing really prepared me ... for how glorious it is to be Bodley's Librarian."

9 to help me as we develop policy and practice. Nothing really prepared me, however, for how glorious it is to be Bodley's Librarian. It's a never-ending delight that the Bodleian is held in high esteem by those who use it and those who know it."

This mention of her previous roles gave your Editor an ideal chance to look back with Sarah over her interesting and varied career so far. She graduated originally from Smith College in 1970, before moving on to receive a Master of Science in library science from Simmons College in 1973, and, in 1982, a PhD in German literature from Johns Hopkins University. "When I graduated from college, I got a job at Harvard alphabetizing and filing catalogue cards into the catalogue. It was a privilege to be associated with the great Widener Library. Because I was always eager to learn something new, I was drafted to be the first head of computer-based cataloguing, when Harvard joined OCLC."

From Harvard, Sarah's career took her southwards from Massachusetts to Maryland. "I left to pursue a Master's degree in German at Johns Hopkins University, and ended up with a PhD. I went on to RLG [Research Libraries Group], where I was a manager of Library Coordination. I travelled across the US and got to know many different libraries as I trained people in the use of the RLIN system. RLG's programmes of shared acquisitions, shared cataloguing, shared resources, and shared preservation really shaped my sense of the value of cooperation."

From here, it was on to a position as Head of Technical Services at the National Agricultural Library (NAL) where she reports having "had much international travel - Moscow, Egypt, the Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, Indonesia, and the UK, where I worked regularly with the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau (CABI). I moved from NAL to the Library of Congress where I first headed Cataloguing and subsequently Special Collections and Public Services." While there, she led in the establishment of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging.

"My last position before coming to Oxford was Cornell University Librarian, a job I loved, for over ten years." Under her direction, Cornell University Library was honoured with the ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries award in 2002.

On a more personal note, Sarah received the American Library Association's Melvil Dewey Award in 2007. She has also been the President of the Association of Research Libraries, and her old college, Smith College, awarded her the Smith Medal in 2010 for 'exemplifying in her life and work the true purpose of a liberal arts education'. Also in 2010, the Bodleian Libraries and University Collections were awarded the Queen's Anniversary Prize for the excellence of their collections and their efforts in widening access to their historic collections.

With such an illustrious career to look back upon, your Editor asked Sarah the difficult question of what she saw as her personal highlights. Very modestly, she replied, "The high points have been the wonderful colleagues I have had in each role." However, when pressed, she went on to say " ... also, serving as a Council on Library Resources (now CLIR) Academic Library Management Intern in mid career, where I shadowed a very thoughtful library director at the University of Georgia for a year. [At the Library of Congress] It was forming the Program for Cooperative Cataloging, which brought together the contributions of cataloguers across the nation and internationally, increasing bibliographic access and reducing costs. At Cornell, it was making strides in digitization, including bringing the arXiv under the auspices of the Library and starting Project Euclid, a scholarly publishing initiative for maths and statistics. After three years it was self-sustaining and two-thirds of the content it offered was open access." She added, with a note of pride, "I was honoured to serve on the Association of Research Libraries Board and as ARL President." Bringing things more up to the moment, Sarah went on to say that at Oxford her highlight (so far) "was receiving £25 million from the Garfield Weston Foundation to renovate the New Bodleian Library. The first instalment, £10 million, came without fanfare in the afternoon post in the form of a handwritten cheque."

10 And, when asked about the least favourite points of her career, she replied, "I've repressed them. Probably it would be moments of personal weakness, when I lost my temper." In confessional mode, Sarah went on to say, "I screw up all the time. I feel terribly disorganized and envy my colleagues who always seem so much more knowledgeable and articulate than I. I go a long way on passion and on energy."

Looking back over the developments that have taken place during Sarah's first five years at the Bodleian, e.g. the partnership with Google books and the new repository building in Swindon, your Editor asked what Sarah hopes people will see as her major achievements (so far). "Although people might consider my greatest achievements to date the rapid rethinking of our storage solutions after failing to gain planning permission, the subsequent erection of the Book Storage Facility (BSF) in Swindon, the barcoding of over 7 million volumes and the transfer of these books plus 1.4 million maps to the BSF, raising (with the help of colleagues) almost £50 million for capital projects and endowment, and the balancing of a budget that had been in deficit for almost a decade ... " she said, but went on to say, with a genuine sense of humility, " ... I would prefer to think of my biggest contribution as helping my colleagues develop a sense of confidence and a 'can do' attitude. It is really they who have accomplished so much."

"I go a long way on passion and on energy."

Oxford and Cambridge are often seen in a different league to other UK universities, and your Editor was keen to find out whether the pressures resulting from the current financial climate are affecting them in the same way, and what Sarah sees as the major challenges for her personally in the coming years. "I've worked at very large libraries in the US, but I always thought we shared with smaller places the same challenges. There are never enough resources to go around, never enough time to get everything done that needs to be done ..." but, she continued, "... the solution isn't always to have more money or more people. Years ago, when I worked for the Research Libraries Group in the 1980s, we had a \$3 million deficit and a \$6 million budget. Our president told us: you will never manage as well as when you have scarce resources."

When asked about the challenges currently occupying her mind, Sarah said, "At the Bodleian, we have a big budget (£37m) but we've had to cut millions over the past several years, and we are down 80 university-funded positions as a result. That means we've had to figure out how to be more efficient, more entrepreneurial, and more focused. But one of the things I hated about RLG was that a lot of people were made redundant because of our deficit. In a big organization like the Bodleian, we've tried to avoid redundancies by helping people re-skill, find new jobs, and move into vacant positions. We've also had voluntary retirements. I'm glad we have been able to reduce our staff without the trauma of redundancies."

Your Editor then took the opportunity to look at the wider environment for scholarly publishing and academic institutions in the UK, asking Sarah how she sees the sector developing, especially given the recent changes to funding for both Further and Higher Education. She said, "I think libraries will work together more closely, with deeper integration ..." citing shared services, such as shared storage, as one example of the right direction. But, she went on to ask "... why shouldn't we have shared library systems, shared web pages, shared acquisitions, shared cataloguing, etc? We have a lot of opportunity to reduce cost and improve service by working together."

"... many researchers ... are not really embracing open access as a replacement for the traditional peer-reviewed journal."

And, of the future for scholarly publishing, she continued, "I'm not certain what will happen in scholarly publishing. The present model doesn't seem sustainable, but many researchers, with few exceptions, are not really embracing open access as a replacement for the traditional peer-reviewed journal ..." Sarah said, before adding "... I think something much more disruptive will happen in the future than we presently can envision. Both publishers and libraries will need to shift radically as data and findings are more easily shared with broad communities. There will need to be new forms of certification and dissemination. The question is, how fast will this happen? Almost 35 years

11 ago I was on an ALA committee on the journals crisis. I hope we can move to a new paradigm of scholarly communications that gets us out of this struggle soon."

And, on this optimistic note, your Editor drew the interview to a close by asking Sarah how she relaxes outside work. "My time is spent with family and friends, reading, cooking, taking walks with my dog, and visiting museums and National Trust houses. I love living here in the UK, where there are so many places for me to explore." With that, your Editor thanked Sarah for her time and wished her well for what will, inevitably, be a very busy future.

"I hope we can move to a new paradigm of scholarly communications that gets us out of this struggle soon."