

Interviewee: Gordon Peacock (Percy Gordon Peacock)
Dates: 1966 -1989
Role(s): Sub Librarian 1966
University Librarian 1972-1989
Now Librarian Emeritus



Article commissioned by Carolyn Rowlinson:

A contribution to the SURSA Oral History by Gordon peacock. August 2015.

With an associated document:

- On learning Nihongo. Gordon Peacock, 1992.

How I came to Stirling:

I was appointed sub-librarian at Stirling University in 1966, the third member of the library staff to be appointed, following John Stirling (University Librarian) and his secretary (Ann Yule). The interview was held in Edinburgh with John Stirling, Principal Tom Cottrell and H H Donnelly, the first Secretary of the University, forming the selection committee. Donnelly was a long-standing friend of my then chief, Dugald MacArthur, University Librarian at St Andrews.

I had spent five years at St Andrews, and before that two years on the staff of Shropshire County Library. The post of sub-librarian was then about half-way up the library career ladder

Stirling and Cambridge: a comparison:

My direct experience of universities is limited to two institutions: Cambridge as an undergraduate and St Andrews as an assistant librarian. In this section I will confine my remarks to Cambridge, more specifically to King's College, Cambridge, to which I was admitted in 1953.

In my year King's admitted some 80 undergraduates from UK schools, either directly or following National Service. Almost half of the men admitted came from English public schools. (Women were not admitted to King's until 1972). Of the 24 candidates awarded scholarships to King's on the basis of the examination that I sat in December 1952, sixteen came from English public schools, including three from Harrow and six from Eton. King's was not the kind of environment in which the diffident son of a railwayman could readily make friends.

I recall once walking through Paddington station with a friend from Christ's on our way home for the vacation. We were informally but not outrageously dressed, our college scarves indicating that we were Cambridge men. Two men passed us going in the opposite direction. "Good God" said one to the other. "Is that how chaps go up to Cambridge these days?" The idea that Cambridge should be reserved for a particular kind of "chap" was still widely encountered.

I am privileged not only to have been a senior officer of Stirling University but also, on my retirement, to have been granted a place as a student on the four-year Japanese course. Often during the course I reflected on the differences between my Cambridge and my Stirling student experiences. Though older than most of my companions on the

Japanese course by some three decades I was readily accepted by them. We were all starting out on a difficult discipline from the same point. Questions of status and background were irrelevant. There was an easy relationship between us, regardless of where had come from.

St Andrews University Library:

St Andrews University is the only other university of which I have direct experience. Dugald MacArthur had served with distinction as a Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Navy during the war. He was appointed University Librarian at St Andrews in 1961 and began the long overdue modernization of the administration of the library and its building. There was much to be done.

The main catalogue was in the form of large loose-leaf ledgers. Two hands were needed to manhandle them onto a desk for consultation. Individual entries were typed out on slips of paper which were then pasted onto the appropriate binder pages. When a page became full, it had to be removed and completely re-typed. This was one feature of library administration at St Andrews that I resolved *not* to take with me to Stirling.

That the building functioned at all was due entirely to Dugald's genius for cramming books and readers into small spaces. It was not without its own charm, however. The Upper Hall, which housed the library's collection of early printed books, would have made a wonderful setting (particularly on a dark winter's evening) for an M R James ghost story. Narrow stairs led to a gallery. Ricketty ladders gave access to higher shelves. Across the floor ran a meridian line established by the seventeenth century astronomer James Gregory. If you followed the line with your eye through a window and then to the distant horizon it would come to rest on a marker one and a half miles to the south on Scooniehill. A bracket outside a window held Gregory's telescope during his transit observations. Tradition has it that at one point in its history the marker pillar served to hold up one end of a neighbouring cottage's washing line.

I owe to my two years in the army an asset that relatively few candidates for library posts could offer at that time: I knew some Russian, having been seconded to the Joint Services School for Linguists, then based at a disused naval air station outside Crail. St Andrews had a substantial Russian collection, which became one of my responsibilities. Stirling had no plans to teach Russian, but throughout university science departments there was a growing interest in Soviet scientific publications, and it was helpful for a library to have a member of staff competent, if not expert, in the language.

My seven months at JSSL also ensured that I arrived in St Andrews with at least some understanding of the differences between England and Scotland. Traps awaited the unwary. Noticing one day that the saltire was flying over a public building in South Street I went into the information bureau to ask what the occasion was. "On this day in 1305" came the answer "William Wallace was cruelly done to death by the English".

The community:

We (my wife Jean, our four children and I) lived in Alva, moving into a new house on an estate to the west of the town on 23 December 1966. Later we learned that we had greatly amused our new neighbours by putting up a Christmas tree and lights before doing anything else. Five years later we moved to a larger, older house in Alva. Our neighbours took this second move as evidence that "we had decided to stay".

Generally the presence of the university a few miles down the road was welcomed. It created much needed employment opportunities, and staff and students moving into the town were a boost to the local economy.

It was also welcomed for another reason which, when I first heard it, somewhat surprised me. It was welcomed on the grounds that future local school leavers "would not have to leave home in order to obtain a university education". The last thing that my school contemporaries wanted was to go to a university that allowed them to live with their parents, but that was in the halcyon days when one didn't graduate from university with a mountain of debt.

Very occasionally I heard disappointment expressed that a Scot had not been appointed to the post I held. I cannot recall ever feeling that a response was called for. I did however prepare a response for use in an emergency, which was to point out that the word *university* is derived from the medieval Latin *universitas scholarium*, a community of scholars brought together without regard for national loyalties. The same argument could also be deployed to rebut the criticism that Stirling was not a "real" university because of the alleged narrowness of its curriculum.

One great advantage of Alva as a place to live was that it was at the foot of the Ochil Hills. A few minutes' walk from home brought me to Alva Glen. Often I would follow the path to the top of the glen, then on long summer evenings continue my walk to the summit of Ben Cleuch to enjoy a truly panoramic view of Central Scotland.

The Queen's visit:

It was on one such walk, a day or two after the Queen's visit on 12 October 1972, that I fell in with another walker. Learning of my connection with the university he could hardly wait to give vent to his anger and disgust. I attempted damage limitation but my heart was not in it. There was no avoiding the conclusion that the event would do us immense harm.

<p>Arguably the disorder attending the Queen’s visit was considerably less than that seen two years earlier in Cambridge when a riot engulfed an event at the Garden House Hotel during a protest against the then military regime in Greece. Few however of those whom I met outside the university were in the mood to accept mitigating arguments of this kind.</p>
<p>I was pained by the vilification of university staff whom I knew to be humane and reasonable people. Not knowing quite what to do that would not make matters worse, I wrote a short note of support to our embattled Principal Tom Cottrell. I expected no response, but after Tom’s death Mrs Cottrell wrote to thank me for the gesture and to say that Tom had greatly appreciated it.</p>
<p>Some twenty years or more after the event I was at a social gathering in a northern town where I happened to make a passing reference to the Queen’s visit to Stirling. No one present had even heard of it.</p>
<p>“The land of unlikeness”: I spent twenty-two years at Stirling, seventeen of them as University Librarian, my tenure of office coinciding with the digital revolution. Librarians everywhere sought to imagine what this revolution might mean for their libraries, their readers and, not least, their jobs. Revisiting those years with the wisdom of hindsight suggests that I wasn’t nearly imaginative enough.</p>
<p>Let me reflect on some of the things that have given me pleasure since leaving Stirling University Library: Half the books I read are now (mostly free or very cheap) downloads to my laptop, my kindle or my tablet. Language skills that may have lapsed can now be revived through access to online dictionaries, audio clips, and parallel foreign language/English texts. Liddell and Scott’s Greek lexicon (a faithful companion since 1953) now serves as a door stop. If I want to hear the Hebrew scriptures read in Hebrew, a rabbi is only a click away. <i>Mainichi Shimbun</i> is as accessible as the <i>Guardian</i>. And I haven’t even mentioned the power of Google. I slink past my (threatened) local branch library with a sense of guilt that I no longer need it and now rarely visit it. None of these things could I have imagined when my career in librarianship began.</p>
<p>Auden imagines “the land of unlikeness” to be a place where we “will see rare beasts and have unique experiences”. Stirling’s new library has given us a glimpse of this new land. It’s an exciting place. But would I want to <i>live</i> there? Hum ...</p>
<p>Gordon Peacock. August 2015</p>
<p>Ends</p>

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