

Obituary

James Thompson 1932–2015



James Thompson, one of the foremost academic librarians of his generation, died in Birmingham on 30 January 2015, aged 83, after a period of illness. His funeral took place in Birmingham on 17 February – a moving occasion and celebratory of his Geordie roots. He is survived by his second wife, Susan (whom he married in 1988), and by his first wife, Mary, and their son and daughter.

Jim was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 11 January 1932, the eldest of four children of James and Mary Thompson. He grew up in Pine Street, off the Scotswood Road, then a deprived area. Jim, however, was determined to succeed. Armed with a strong intellect and a love of books (acquired when he was evacuated to Maryport during the Second World War), he won a place at St Cuthbert's Grammar School, Newcastle, leaving in 1948 with numerous prizes.

His career as librarian began, aged 16, in Newcastle public libraries, and, within three years, he had studied for and passed all relevant professional examinations. But this was not enough for Jim and in 1953, against the odds, he enrolled at what was then King's College, Newcastle, one division of the federal University of Durham. He graduated in 1957 with a first class BA honours degree in English and briefly (1957–59) returned to work at Newcastle city libraries.

In 1959 he entered academic librarianship at the University of Nottingham. He had become chief cataloguer there by 1960 but left for a Senior Assistant Librarian post at the University of East Anglia in 1963 before moving to the University of Glasgow as Deputy Librarian in 1965. His Glasgow tenure was short, for in 1967 Jim was appointed Librarian at the University of Reading, in succession to Don Richnell, at the incredibly young age of 35. He stayed for two decades.

Jim arrived within three years of the opening of the new university library in Whiteknights Park, but significant growth in the student population and the library's stock (by 140 per cent under Jim) necessitated a major extension in 1985. Collection development was not simply a matter of quantity but of quality, with some really impressive acquisitions in the special collections field, none more so than the archives of British publishing and modern literary papers. This made Reading the natural base for the Location Register of Twentieth Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters, of which Jim was project head in 1982–87.

Complementing this concern for collection-building was a systematic enhancement of end-user services and an enthusiastic championing of library automation. Jim was among the first practitioners to recognise the many simultaneous opportunities and potential threats of automation, which he spelled out in his equivocally titled book *The end of libraries* (1982). Moreover, he practised what he preached, introducing automated issues at Reading as early as 1974, with cataloguing following in 1979.

When Jim was eventually persuaded to leave Reading in 1987 to become Librarian at the University of Birmingham, he was taking on an enormous task, for lack of investment in the library meant that it was by then no longer at the professional cutting edge, especially in matters of automation. The external environment for UK higher education and its libraries was likewise challenging, as was the Follett report would thoroughly investigate in 1993.

Supported by a new Vice-Chancellor and a new Registrar and Secretary, and taking full advantage of the devolved budget centre governance then being introduced across the university (which accorded him greater autonomy), Jim set about breathing new life into the library. He consciously sought to redefine and redirect its mission and work, as he explained in his penultimate book,

Redirection in academic library management (1991), which used Birmingham as a case study. His retrospective account of these years can be read in his *A centennial history of the library of the University of Birmingham* (2000), researched and written after his retirement in 1995.

In brief, during his Birmingham years, automation was extended to book issues, an OPAC service (preceded by large-scale retrospective catalogue conversion), and networking of CD-ROMs. Most remaining departmentally managed libraries were transferred to university library control, and their services upgraded. A phased programme of improvements to existing accommodation was implemented. Library funding was stabilised and remodelled, with a direct link to growth in student numbers. The staff structure was modernised and numerous key appointments made. Research collections were given a much higher profile, with many important acquisitions and projects, culminating in Birmingham's election into membership of the Consortium of University Research Libraries in 1994 and the award of almost £1 million from the post-Follett Research Support Libraries Programme.

In managing his libraries, Jim excelled at seeing and articulating the strategic picture, but he also paid close attention to operational detail. He cared deeply about the interests of students, his own staff and of other staff at the institutions where he worked. It was a mark of the respect which academics held him in that he was elected President of the Association of University Teachers at Reading (1981–83). Although he could present a serious exterior, he was in reality a warm-hearted individual with a good sense of humour and a passionate love of his family, films and gardening.

Besides the 'day job', Jim made a big contribution to the wider library profession. Nationally, he was active in both the Library Association and SCONUL, serving on the council of each for several years as well as on many of their committees. His Fellowship of the Library Association was awarded as early as 1963. Internationally, he was a veritable ambassador for British librarianship through his foreign visits as lecturer or consultant. Both at home and overseas, he was known for his authoritative writings on the principles and practice of librarianship, including eight books. Perhaps the most influential was *An introduction to university library administration*, which passed through four editions between 1970 and 1987.

A major new central library is currently under construction at the University of Birmingham. Sadly, Jim will not see it open, but he would surely have warmly welcomed this development as a further 'redirection' of the library and a tangible assertion of its ongoing relevance at the heart of academic life. The new building will doubtless offer an operational model for library collections and services which differs from what Jim experienced in his heyday, but hopefully it will be informed by the same vision, timeless principles, and professionalism that characterised his own long career as 'bonny lad' made good.

Clive Field

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