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An apology of a life: a Presidential address

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In the last issue of *Scottish Libraries* I was much taken with a survey from Perth & Kinross Libraries of reader's views on the best and worst books, of the books they wished they had read and the ones they had never finished. Most of the predictable favourites were there, some, such as *Lord of the Rings* in more than one category. Not mentioned in the list was one of those great books which everyone has heard of but few, perhaps, even in this audience, have started never mind finished. It is John Henry, Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, published in 1864. Newman had been publicly challenged about his beliefs and felt bound not just to defend them but to demonstrate where these had come from. He was a splendid and still surprisingly accessible writer on great themes and a staunch proponent of such

eternal verities as Truth and Conscience. The work itself is a sort of extended bibliography, full of the authors, the books and the literature which influenced him and formed his opinions. In this talk I too want to reflect on great themes and on those colleagues who have influenced me. I shall comment rather less on the professional books which have had an influence, for they are regrettably few. I also want to reflect not only on the conference theme of Bridging the Digital Divide but on why we become librarians, on the importance of public service and professional involvement and on the heavy responsibility we bear given our power to influence the habits, attitudes and attainments of our readers. And if this can hardly claim to be my own Apologia, I trust that conference will indulge me in what I hope are some relevant reminiscences in what might otherwise be seen as an apology of a life.

Like many of my age and circumstance I am the first member of my family to attend University following that huge expansion of access to higher education brought about in the mid-1960's by the Robbins report. I came from a book free working class household but had been a voracious and often indiscriminate reader from the age of five, with tastes governed only by the availability of stock in Arbroath Public Library. The move to University and its attempts to replace my omnivorous tendencies with some sense of discrimination and critical faculty was only partially successful, as a lasting addiction to seedy detective and naval fiction testifies, but that experience at university developed my view of the power of education as a tool to shape a more meritocratic society and to offer equal opportunities to all. Education relies on both information and knowledge and libraries are not just storehouses but purveyors of both. The library like the Co-op pays a dividend. A library is not just

the most powerful emblem of civilisation but provides the dividend of a civilised society.

As a clear beneficiary of the expansion of higher education and its free provision as a national good, I have been much dismayed by the brevity of the period in which government has felt able to ensure that merit not money defines access to higher education. Conversely the social inclusion agenda which has been launched by the Scottish Executive is hugely welcome as an agenda with the same goal of ensuring that the ancient Scottish tradition of the lad o' pairts and access to education continues. For a disappointingly large number of our nation, higher education still remains an unreachable and unsought goal because of the accident of place of birth rather than ability. At Strathclyde as in other universities we run a summer academy for 14 year old children from backgrounds where university is seen as irrelevant in an

effort to demonstrate not just that university is fun, but that it is attainable and normal. This year the first graduates of our summer academy have reached 6th year at school and we are beginning to get applications from those whose aspirations have been changed by that experience of summer school. Within the last month and quite by chance I met an extraordinarily able scientist from Govan who is now a doctoral student at MIT. A scientist from Govan may sound like an oxymoron, and nearly was. He is a passionate football player. But at his school the football team was run by the Physics teacher and you only got to play for the team if you did Physics and did it well. So he did physics, but he had to do his homework in secret, hidden even from his parents, visiting the public library while pretending to be a hooligan. Being clever in Govan was not seen as a virtue. Nor is this some ancient hoary fairy story since he's only twenty-four years old. I believe that our public libraries can provide a

doorway not just to Narnia and escapism but to lifelong learning at whatever level is appropriate for the individual. We can indeed change lives, even if civilising Govan must remain a longer term ambition.

After university I fell into university librarianship almost by chance. In a series of posts I met the usual broad selection of colleagues ranging from the inspirational to the terminally bewildered. Significantly for me I discovered that what seemed a disproportionate number of them had three characteristics. Firstly they cared deeply about their profession and were proud of it. Secondly they were clear that they were involved in public service and regarded this as a privilege and not a burden. Thirdly they believed that they could make a difference and influence people's lives. The most dramatic example of that for me came in the Erskine Medical Library where someone did genuinely come in from

an operating theatre to seek information while I was on duty. The accuracy of that information clearly influenced someone's life! What faith it gave the patient in her doctor is perhaps more problematic.

At that time I came upon the major professional author, other than Ranganathan, who influenced me. Jimmy Thompson then Librarian of Reading University had a fluent writing style and a passion for argument. Here was another man who cared deeply and thought deeply about the future of his profession and why it mattered. His regular publications were impatiently awaited and his classic work *"The End of Libraries"* was profoundly farsighted and influential. Sadly the professional monograph appears almost dead, lost in a welter of conference proceedings where well presented Powerpoint shows are converted into collections of semi-literate writing by bullet point. Recently in my view only

Bob Usherwood and Cliff Lynch have shown the ability to produce effective and sustained opinion and polemic.

When I began my professional apprenticeship there were no such things as mentors, but I had clear role models. Names like MacArthur, Fifoot and Moon will mean little to most of you, but I learned what little I know about management, professional pride and financial duplicity from them. I learnt when to fight, when to concede gracefully and when to persist because important principles were at stake. As importantly I learned many lessons from my nominal juniors not least that the view of the library was shaped by them and not by me and that people like me with a high-handed and casual approach to routine were a danger. One of the best lessons I learned was when as a new chief librarian attempting to be participative and democratic, I was fired from the weekend desk rota by a senior library assistant,

because I had been too self important to bother learning desk routines. I was more trouble than I was worth. (No change there then). I learned that the best libraries are egalitarian places and that it is entirely possible to be egalitarian in a hierarchical system.

I was then fortunate to be appointed a chief librarian in 1986 and was and am an accidental but happy member of the class of 86, the self-styled Blakeney Group. In the mid-1980's about twenty of us were overpromoted in libraries as a result of a rash of retirements. We were brought together in Loughborough by an external agency I no longer recall and instantly bonded as a victim support group. In time that became a survivors group and it has proved hugely supportive professionally. I envy, although that is the wrong word, the fact that such professional mentoring and support

has now been recognised as an important and valuable personal development tool.

I am glad to have worked with many people who have shared that passion and conviction even if less able to articulate it.

Colleagues who see education as a positive and liberating force the more widely it is applied; colleagues who believe that the truth is important if not always certain and that the free flow of information is the best guardian of the truth; colleagues who have gone out and bought copies of *Lady Chatterley*, or *Mapplethorpe* or Salman Rushdie or even *Spycatcher*, to demonstrate that censorship is a first step on the road to oppression and not therefore to be countenanced.

Public service is a much diminished concept, rarely mentioned these days, but I believe that most librarians perform it, working not just for the good but for the

betterment of their community. The appearance of electronic information has been rapid, frightening and almost unmanageable. It's easy to perceive a threat to and a dilution of our professional skills and knowledge by what Pluchak calls the satisfied inept, those who think that because they can use the Internet easily, it is easy to use. And so we sit apparently threatened by Internet surfing on the one hand and increased book purchasing through Amazon.com on the other. A casual glance at recent press reports might suggest not just a library service but a country going to the dogs. Within the last week Scotland has lost its fourth game in a row – the worst sequence ever, church-going has been found to be dropping to a point where we are officially a godless nation and reports have shown the library service in terminal decline, with falling budgets, falling readership and ageing buildings now revelling in a variety of names but never of course library. But this doom and gloom culture is always

with us in Scotland. Last week it was mass emigration and a declining population and the release of a new Leonard Cohen album – music to commit suicide by.

I am then reminded irresistably of Alasdair Reid's wonderful poem "Scotland", especially here in Peebles:

It was a day peculiar to this piece of the planet
when larks rose on long thin strings of singing
and the air shifted with the shimmer of actual angels.

Greenness entered the body. The grasses
shivered with presences, and sunlight
stayed like a halo on hair and heather and hills.

Walking into town, I saw, in a radiant raincoat,
the woman from the fish-shop. 'What a day it is!'

cried I, like a sunstruck madman.

And what did she have to say for it?

Her brow grew bleak, her ancestors raged in their graves

as she spoke with their ancient misery:

'We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it!'

Mischievously one might suggest that under the Barnett formula, England will pay for it. Statistics on readership and library usage are not timely and these predate the massive investment in the People's Network and in libraries which is only just coming to fruition. The exciting stands in the hallway here testify that the re-investment in libraries is leading to growing not declining usage. However I do believe that the values which inform the publicly funded libraries and librarians of this country are more important than ever and are the keystone which will bridge the digital divide. One of the most encouraging features of this conference is that it was attended by two ministers of the Scottish government and a senior Westminster MP. It is clear that the message of what we can contribute is not just

understood and accepted at the highest levels but government has the faith to back that understanding with hard cash.

As we heard yesterday, literacy remains a bigger issue than IT literacy and the recently announced Readership Development Network Project puts Scottish librarians at the heart of this. And NOF Funding for training means that we shall be equally relevant to electronic information services. As I become older I am increasingly concerned to have something named after me, so let me give you Law's Law – User Friendly Systems Aren't. The need for training and support, what used to be called User Instruction, is greater than ever. Our ability to serve the public has never been greater; our desire to do so remains as keen as ever; and our key role in society is more critical than ever. I don't believe that I am in any measure alone in believing that as a

beneficiary of a massive social experiment in the twenty-five years from the mid-1960's to the 1990's, which means that thanks to the opening of the universities I have been offered a life leading to a chair in a university rather than work on the shop-floor of a local factory, I have then a responsibility to the community which has provided these opportunities. My generation of senior librarians has all benefitted from that golden quarter of a century and faces a responsibility to ensure that such a tradition of public service continues to flourish in our libraries.

And lest that sound too po-faced, there is another view of life to the 'we'll pay for it' one. Arbroath stayed up in the first division despite being part-time: England's pedigree as a world class football team is about to be exposed as cruelly as it's cricket team; we live in a country where this time next year we can express our democratic view of our government;

sheep have joined the information society, sharing information about how to beat cattle grids; and Elton John is playing the SECC at Christmas.

I'd like to shift theme a little to talk about professionalism.

There is a general perception that people are disengaging from professional associations whether from pressure at work or a post-Thatcherite ennui and disinclination to recognise and work within society. If true – and I'm not sure that it is any more than nostalgia – I would like to present the case for involvement.

Firstly the professional one. For those who are ambitious, and I at least count that no sin, there is no finer training ground than a professional association. I can think of hardly any senior university librarian who has not served an apprenticeship in a professional body. That's where you learn about budgets; that's where you learn about

committees; that's where you learn about politics; that's where you learn how to get things done. It's the best form of personal development I know, a sentiment also expressed yesterday by Mary Auckland.

Secondly the personal one. I have been fortunate to make many good friends in my career as a librarian. One of the privileges of the Presidency is the ability to invite some of them to join one at Peebles, and I'll say a little more about some of them shortly. Good friends teach you lessons relatively painlessly, save you from at least some disasters and share in your successes and frustrations. This is a good profession for making friends from a' the airts and that happens when you are professionally involved.

Thirdly and lastly there is a recognition of professional worth and a reinforcing of the relevance of professional values. While we sit in comfort here in Peebles, information services throughout the world are in the front-line of fighting

for truth and freedom of expression, against censorship and poverty and disease. Wide professional involvement offers a humbling recognition of our role as a small part of a fine and honourable profession in service to the community.

My first significant overseas trip was twenty-five years ago to Malawi. Then it was well if dictatorially governed by Hastings Banda, but was then, as now, an incredibly poor country. The Malawi Library Association had at that time twenty-eight members and professional development relied almost entirely on their ability to pick the brains of the occasional visiting librarian. I've stayed in touch with Malawi, possibly the only other country which is solidly Church of Scotland and where David Livingstone, a Strathclyde graduate, remains unusually a venerated figure. The country is now devastated by poverty, famine and AIDS with over one quarter of the education budget being spent on

burying teachers. Last year a friend I made there, the National Librarian, died of AIDS. He and his colleagues know that one defence against disease, famine and contaminated water supplies is information and education. Information provision is literally a matter of life and death and Roderick preached that message by example until he died.

My first IFLA conference trip was to Manila in 1980. It was there that I first met Beverley Lynch and formed my first long-lasting IFLA friendship. I learned from Beverley the value and pleasure and professional support that can come at unexpected times in one's career and that it's just as easy to have friends in California as Cardonald. It was also there that I learned first that participation in organisations cannot be tested by the question what's in it for me, but by the question what can I learn and what can I contribute. I recall vividly a

trip to an agriculture library high above Manila Bay. We were there in reality for the view. Regrettably a good haar meant that we had little alternative but actually to visit the one room small library. A busload of us crammed into a room with sparse furnishing and locked glass cases. After some harrumphing about open access and the inappropriateness of locked cases by we pampered delegates, the librarian explained that they had to lock up the books because if they were stolen, the replacement cost was charged to her salary and each American textbook was equivalent to her annual salary. The laughter of myself and others was quickly stilled as we saw Asian colleagues nodding in agreement and recognition. A job in a Scottish University Library suddenly didn't seem so bad.

Ten years later in Istanbul when I was chairing the IFLA Medical Libraries Section I was diffidently approached by a

Middle Eastern librarian seeking ethical advice. In the hospital where she worked doctors were seeking Medline searches on how to deal with civilian victims of chemical warfare attacks. But her government had stated that such attacks were not happening and so to conduct such a search implicitly contradicting the government would probably lead at best to a charge of treason. So, let the patients die in agony untreated or risk arrest and torture? I still have no answer to that question. Serial subscriptions suddenly seemed a trivial problem.

IFLA also produced another life changing experience, the now almost mythic conference in Moscow which took place in the middle of a coup. Amongst many other reminiscences with which I regularly bore audiences was the fascination of watching how information and disinformation, rumour and fact flowed round the city, how official news agencies from

Pravda to CNN floundered to find what was happening and how ultimately the failure of the plotters depended on both their failure to control the flow of information and their lack of understanding that global communication meant that their only hope lay in managing the news rather than suppressing it.

I'm honoured by the presence of Ross Shimmon here today. I've known Ross for many years and latterly worked closely with him in his role as Secretary General of IFLA. I've learned from Ross about how one should simply practice rather than preach professional values. Ross spent a proportion of his career teaching at a Library School in Papua New Guinea. Married and with a young family he was clearly doing this from a sense of commitment rather than personal financial gain. Indeed wherever one goes throughout the world one can find British librarians teaching

aspiring librarians and believing like Newman, if less overtly, in principles and that librarianship is a principled profession and not just a technical one.

I'm also pleased that Mary Auckland has been able to attend. I've again known Mary for many years and we have often spent time together at IFLA and other conferences and Mary taught me at least one very important lesson. Mary is one of the greatest networkers I know. I once expressed a view in a regrettably patronising tone and with huge infelicity of language that she collected lame ducks. In fact she takes huge pleasure from meeting others from different backgrounds and traditions knowing that a British university librarian has as much to learn from others as to impart and that the sharing of professional knowledge is a broad two way street. And that friendship also involves forbearance!

I have been talking about my experiences internationally. But there are other digital divides than that between the First and the Third World a theme expressed by a number of speakers this week. We are all familiar with class based distinctions which should be challenged by agendas for social inclusion and widening access to education. But there are divides in other parts of society. The current bestseller in America is Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*. This properly endangered species is perfectly well aware of the changes taking place as we move towards a knowledge economy, but prefers its ancient habits and rituals while counselling others to change. The Prime Minister for example suffers from a curious schizophrenia in that he quite properly recognises the importance of IT in education and pursues policies promoting this while at the same time glorying in being personally incapable of the simplest tasks on a pc. Nor is he by any means the only middle class male from the First

World incapable of bridging the digital divide. Until a pc can make coffee, stupid white men will continue to prefer a secretary to a laptop. It is therefore all the more encouraging here in Scotland not just to have a government committed to digital democracy in a digital Scotland and to having New Opportunities Fund money to install systems and train librarians, but to hear the Minister on Monday announce the very large sum for bursaries at IFLA. I hope that there will be a huge number of applicants and that many here at this conference will be able to attend Glasgow IFLA, to make professional friendships with those who attend from every corner of the world and to understand why we are a truly global profession.

IFLA's core values revolve around Universal Bibliographic Control, Universal Availability of Publications and Freedom of Access to Information. These values are probably ones we

all aspire to and yet largely take for granted. It doesn't take very long talking to colleagues from other countries to realise just how fragile these values are and how important it is to act collectively to protect and expound them.

It has been my privilege to know many wonderful librarians who like Newman believed passionately in the power of knowledge, in the transformational possibilities of education; in the fundamental importance of truth and that the highest calling was service to ones community, which thereby offered the possibility of changing people's lives. I do not believe that the development of digital information systems changes that. Firstly there is less of it than is often supposed. It is generally stated that there are 900 million indexed web pages. That sounds a lot, but if an average book has say 300 pages, this means that the web is equal to a library of only 3 million books. Once you strip out the weird,

the exotic and the pornographic, the web is a thin and meagre beast compared to an average research library. And even the smallest library is part of a system where the earlier mentioned programmes of Universal Availability of Publications and Universal Bibliographic Control mean that broadly speaking any book in any language from any country can be identified and then borrowed by a reader. Inter-Library Loan is in my view the most sophisticated international system in the world and yet we take for granted the international standards and agreements which underpin it. Of course the other side of the coin is that such systems have to be kept in a constant state of repair. If information forms the bridge across the digital divide, then the library system – more specifically the international library system - as opposed to the individual library is and will be the keystone in bridging that digital divide.

The digital divide has many faces, governed by geography, by class, by national circumstances and by technology. Some of these we can influence, some we can challenge and some can only humble us with their magnitude. I then empathise with the American theologian Ronald Niebuhr who prayed:

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

The courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference”

In the rough and tumble of budgets, politics and personalities in an essentially comfortable and peaceful country it is easy to forget that we too are a small part of a larger whole, that we are powerful potential influences on the shape of people’s lives and that colleagues from Malawi to Manila carry not just similar values but awesome burdens with a grace and serenity we can only envy. To bridge the

digital divide is not just a challenge and an opportunity but a responsibility to be cheerfully embraced.

I was going to conclude with Newman as I started and his advice that "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt" using that as a context to make the point of the need to hold to our professional value of service however hard the road may seem. Our skills remain more relevant than ever as the information revolution settles into the information society. As Peter Peacock said yesterday libraries still have the power to liberate, to empower and to inspire. However in my apology for a life I remain a child of the sixties and rather than conclude with the words of a theologian, no matter how distinguished I feel I can only conclude with that glorious phrase of liberation theology "we shall overcome" not in the sanitised version of Joni Mitchell but in the raw revolutionary cry of Che Guevara - "Venceremos!".