

OBITUARY

DOUGLAS HAROLD VARLEY (1911–2000)

SCOLMA is sad to record the death of another of the most influential figures in the early years of the organisation. Douglas Varley joined the Committee in the late 1960s when he returned to England from Africa and served as Chairman from 1971 to 1973.

Born 13 August 1911, he read Modern History at Oxford (St. John's) 1929–1932, working in the Junior Library in the College during his degree (he had also previously worked in the school library during his days at Alleyn's School, Dulwich). From 1932–33 he studied for the Diploma in Librarianship at my own institution, then the School of Librarianship, University College London. His card remains in our files, recording among other matters that his 'Career intentions' were to be in 'Municipal library work with an eye to either County or university librarianship'. In fact he took up his first appointment as Assistant Librarian (salary £200 per annum his card records) at the Royal Empire Society, that splendid forcing ground for SCOLMA Committee members and office-holders. During his five years there, later as Deputy Librarian, he began to produce the first of his bibliographical works on Africa, of which the *Bibliography of Italian colonisation in Africa with a section on Abyssinia* and *African native music: an annotated bibliography*, both published in 1936, so stood the test of time that they were both reprinted in 1970, over thirty years later. To carry out research for the second title he received a Phelps-Stokes Trust award to visit the United States and Canada. At the Royal Empire Society he also met and married a colleague, Vera Ward. He gained his FLA in 1937 and received the Oxford Beit Prize in Colonial History for an essay on Lord Milner in 1938.

In January 1938, still only 26, he was appointed Secretary and Chief Librarian to the South African Public Library in Cape Town, taking up the post in March. He held this post for 24 years and will always be remembered as one of those who really shaped what later became the South African Library and eventually, in 1999, the Cape Town branch of the National Library of South Africa. Not that his activities were confined to his own library. He was instrumental in founding and developing the School of Librarianship at the University of Cape Town in 1939, and lectured and examined there in bibliography for many years. A member of the Council of the South African Library Association for all the years he was in South Africa he was President in 1947 and 1948, and served as tutor and examiner for the Association for over twenty years. He was also editor of the Association's journal *South African libraries* from 1951 to 1961. From 1943 to 1961 he was, with his wife, Secretary and Treasurer of the Van Riebeeck Society, seeing through the press (and often being involved in editing) the Society's annual volumes of

transcripts and translations of significant source documents for the history of South Africa.

At the South African Public Library itself among many other activities he began the series of Grey bibliographies; founded (and edited for 14 years) the *Quarterly bulletin* of the Library which continues to be a major source of articles on Africana and matters bibliographical; and founded *Africana nova* in 1958 to complement the coverage of the *South African national bibliography* by including works about South Africa published outside its borders. In addition to this he was of course nurturing the services of the library by organising the planning, funding and implementation of new buildings and facilities, of exhibitions and the creation of a properly funded City Library Service eventually devolving the lending function of his own library to Cape Town City Libraries in 1954. This move left the historical core of the collection, but meant the loss of the subscription element of the original library (Varley himself tells us how an Archbishop of Cape Town had described the original as 'an ideal combination of British Museum and Boots subscription library'). In 1955 therefore Varley founded the Friends of the South African Library, 'more in hope than in expectation... [but] they form a very active supportive body, subsidising publications, Christmas books, lectures, exhibitions and even auction sales of books contributed by its members and by the general public.' (D.H. Varley, 'Making friends in Africa', *Newsletter of the Friends of Liverpool University*, 1996.)

In 1950, Varley had been invited by the Central African Branch of the South African Library Association and the Carnegie Corporation of New York to undertake a wide-ranging survey of library facilities in the three territories of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Eleven years later he moved north himself, when in May 1961 he was appointed Librarian of the recently founded University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (later University of Rhodesia) in Salisbury. The post had professorial status, and his inaugural lecture, *The role of the librarian in the new Africa* delivered on 5th October 1962 was published in 1963. These were difficult political years in Central Africa, and it was at one time proposed that the whole University, Library and all, might have to be moved across the Zambesi into what would later be Zambia. With this trauma avoided, the Varleys organised a Leverhulme funded Conference of African University Libraries in Salisbury in 1964. The published report *Conference of university libraries in Central Africa*, edited by Douglas Varley and published in 1965, remains one of the seminal documents in the history of librarianship in Africa.

In 1966 the Varleys returned at last to England and Douglas took up the post of University Librarian at the University of Liverpool where he served for ten years. It was a major period of consolidation. An extremely decentralised library was restructured into two main complexes, one the existing Harold Cohen Library for the sciences, the other the new Sydney Jones Library for the

arts, the latter planned and constructed during his period of office and formally opened on the day he retired, 30 September 1976. Staff numbers doubled, and total funds for the Library trebled, during his ten years. The University Senate noted at his retirement that 'under his guidance, the Library has developed into one of the major university libraries in this country'.

With his extensive period of working in Africa and his deep interest in Africana and Africanist bibliography Douglas Varley was an obvious candidate to be asked to join the Committee of SCOLMA once he had become established at Liverpool. As noted above he served as Chairman from 1971 to 1973, his predecessors since SCOLMA's foundation in 1962 having been Jim Pearson, Donald Simpson and Louis Frewer. These were particularly active years for SCOLMA: indeed 1973 saw the first issue of *African research and documentation*, following the decision to move on to something more substantial than SCOLMA's newsletter *Library materials on Africa (LMA)*. These years also saw the publication by SCOLMA of *Debates on African legislatures and U.K. Publications and theses on Africa, 1967-68*, both compiled by Miriam Alman, of the 3rd edition of the *SCOLMA directory of libraries, and special collections on Africa* revised by John Roe, and of John Ndegwa's *Printing and publishing in Kenya* and Malcolm McKee's *African newspapers on microfilm*. A productive time indeed. When he retired from Liverpool, SCOLMA made Douglas Varley an Honorary Member.

I myself only met Douglas Varley briefly twice at conferences in the 1980s (I only became involved in SCOLMA in 1976, the year he retired from Liverpool), so personal reminiscences are secondhand. One of the junior members of staff at the University Library in Rhodesia came to study for a master's degree at UCL the year after Varley had moved to Liverpool. Later he himself became University Librarian. Both as student and senior librarian he always referred warmly to Varley's work in Rhodesia whenever we met (he would talk of 'Varley's boys'), and always made a point of making contact with his former chief, every time he visited the U.K. In 1996 I was invited to give a talk at the South African Library in Cape Town, and was able to refer in my opening remarks to the fact that one of my predecessors as Chairman of SCOLMA had been one of their longest serving Librarians. I was immediately made aware of how those present, both the contemporary staff of the Library and other professionals attending the talk, remained vividly conscious of the man and his legacy. It is obvious that he continued to keep in touch with all his past contexts and that those contexts valued his interest. Terry Barringer reminds me that just over fifty years after he had left the staff of the Royal Empire (later Royal Commonwealth) Society Library he wrote supportively during that organisation's travails of 1988-1993, and contributed to the fighting fund.

Other tributes will no doubt speak of Douglas Varley's lifelong interest in music, of his active involvement in retirement with the Friends of Liverpool

University and the Liverpool Bibliographical Society's Working Party of the History of the Book Trade in the North West. In the context of African studies we remember him in *ARD* as a major figure not only for the 28 years he spent running two very significant collections in Africa, but as one of the earliest to become aware of the scholarly potential of collecting, investigating, recording and writing about Africana. Some of his published work in this area has been noted above. To these may be added his articles with Percy Freer in the *South African library journal* in 1942 and 1943, the pioneering first version of the 'Bibliography of South African bibliographies', later revised by Lewin Robinson and Reuben Musiker; his *Adventures in Africana* (Cape Town, 1949) and his *Short history of the newspaper press in South Africa, 1652-1952* (Cape Town, 1952). And a final item, for which we can quote Musiker (A century of bibliographical achievement in South Africa, *Bibliophilia Africana IV: proceedings of the Fourth South African Conference of Bibliophiles*. Cape Town, South African Library, 1981); 'under [Varley's] chairmanship of the Van Riebeeck Festival Book Exhibition Committee in 1952 there emerged one of the finest Africana book exhibition catalogues. *South Africa in print* is a model of its kind, and one of the best exhibition catalogues published: well compiled, bilingual and superbly edited'.

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