

PROFILE

Albert Mullis

My first Profile assignment could not have been easier. I was received with great courtesy and friendliness and yet was offered incisive replies which rapidly created a complex portrayal of someone with clear views, having a professional consistency, but all underpinned by a quiet sense of humour. Accountancy's loss was librarianship's gain when Albert Mullis forsook an interest in the rather better rewarded profession to "drift into" library work in the Walworth Road, opposite the present Labour Party's Headquarters. Like many of his generation, Albert had his early library career interrupted by two years of National Service, in the 7th Queen's Own Hussars. He "joined" the Army on the day Stalin's death was announced and wondered, quite naturally, if his contribution to national defence was needed after all. When he found the Army still needed him to occupy and protect Germany, he hit back by being the only man ever in the Hussars to sit and pass the old Library Association Entrance Examination, which included one paper devoted to the whole of English Literature, i.e. Beowulf to the Modern Novel, to be answered in ninety minutes flat.

He returned to Southwark and continued to study part-time at the old North-Western Poly in Kentish Town and was lured away to Islington Public Libraries because they paid a £100 more than Southwark. Next came Stoke Newington and professional qualification. Armed with a shining new ALA, Albert was promoted to his first professional post, Assistant Reference Librarian, before moving to the then Borough of Hornsey as Chief Cataloguer. This was the first occasion Albert experienced a major shot of adrenalin when faced with the task of converting the stock from Browne to Dewey, as part of the merger activity brought about by the 1965 Act.

This marked the end of the public library stage in his career for he left in 1966 to become the first professional librarian ever to join the Law Commission, a body heavily engaged in law reforms. Albert confessed to no prior knowledge of law or the Civil Service but worked successfully in this setting until moving to the Board of Trade Library then led by the formidable Mr Mallaber. His new post, Chief Technical Cataloguer, rapidly



became Head of Bibliographic Services carrying wider responsibilities embracing acquisition, binding, cataloguing, indexing and, later, involvement in a feasibility study of computer cataloguing. It was from this point that Albert's career became heavily involved in the design and management of major computerisation and standardisation projects, matters in which he is still heavily engaged. After work on INTERLIB he moved to the British Library in 1979 as Head of BLAISE Research and Planning.

In March '81 he began work with the Serials Office, BSD, with involvement in the British Catalogue of Music and the now defunct Catalogue of Audio-Visual materials. In the same period he established contact with the UKSG and has missed only one conference since 1980. There followed a move to the BL Reference Division and later Humanities and Social Sciences as Head of Technical Processing for English language. His involvement in serials bibliographical control standards and automation has operated at international level since 1981. At present Albert is involved in planning the automation of acquisition.

Albert is clear in his own mind that the most interesting point of his career came with his involvement with the Serials Office at the BL Bibliographical Services in the 81-84 period, when he began to meet international colleagues at IFLA and ISDS sessions. He travelled extensively and

"volunteered" to perfect the English of the ISDS manual, a two-year labour of love which culminated in his name appearing on the title-page and his wife's tolerance being stretched to the limit.

Albert's commitment to UKSG led to his appointment as Treasurer in 1986, following in the footsteps of the other Albert, your ex-editor. (Perhaps UKSG ought to create an Albert Award to mark their enormous contribution to the Group). His accountant manque background has showed itself in two respects: in the way he has guided UKSG into a comfortable financial position during his three year's stint and in the fact that his eldest son is an auditor for the Inland Revenue and his youngest is a trainee accountant. He has been instrumental in persuading the Committee to avoid excessive commitments, particularly in the risky field of publishing, and in putting aside reasonable sums to act as a cushion against the occasional financial blip. He has consistently supported sensible investment in new technology designed to improve the Group's administrative processes. His worst moment came when he had to face the membership in 1987 and persuade them to increase the subscription from £16 to £30, a sum which now seems extremely modest. The then threatened loss of membership failed to materialise; instead, since then, there has been an annual growth rate of about 10%. Albert feels that the UKSG finances will now allow the Group to move into practical research projects requiring a reasonable measure of funding.

One might expect someone heavily involved in automation planning, international standards and treasurerships (he is also Treasurer to the MARC

User Group) to be a dry old stick. But time spent with Albert is enjoyable and amusing. He is a cultivated man with a rich sense of humour not lightly influenced by his constant reading of Jane Austen, Evelyn Waugh and P G Wodehouse. He finds relaxation in his beloved garden, although his style is slightly restless as he apparently keeps re-locating beds and plants. He is profoundly against practical food production, instead preferring to seek aesthetic satisfaction from his shrubs, flowers and trees. He is a lover of English art from 1800 onwards and a keen member of the National Trust, through which he continues to develop his interest in architecture and gardens. He owns an extensive library of fiction and non-fiction which illustrates his catholic taste. He likes the old movies, such as "Citizen Kane" and enjoys a good game of cricket. Albert takes an obvious pride in his family and is grateful for his wife's tolerance when the demands of his work have excessively infringed on leisure time. Perhaps in self-defence, she operates professionally as a peripatetic librarian in South Buckinghamshire, while his daughter is intent on becoming a "drabbie", presumably as a reaction to the male accountants, auditors and treasurers who make up the domestic scene. The interview on which this profile was based was lengthy and greatly enjoyable; with Albert there is always a wicked sense of humour bubbling just beneath the surface. His lived-in face and twinkling eye betray a real complexity and humanity which must have served him well in a long and distinguished career.

John Cowley