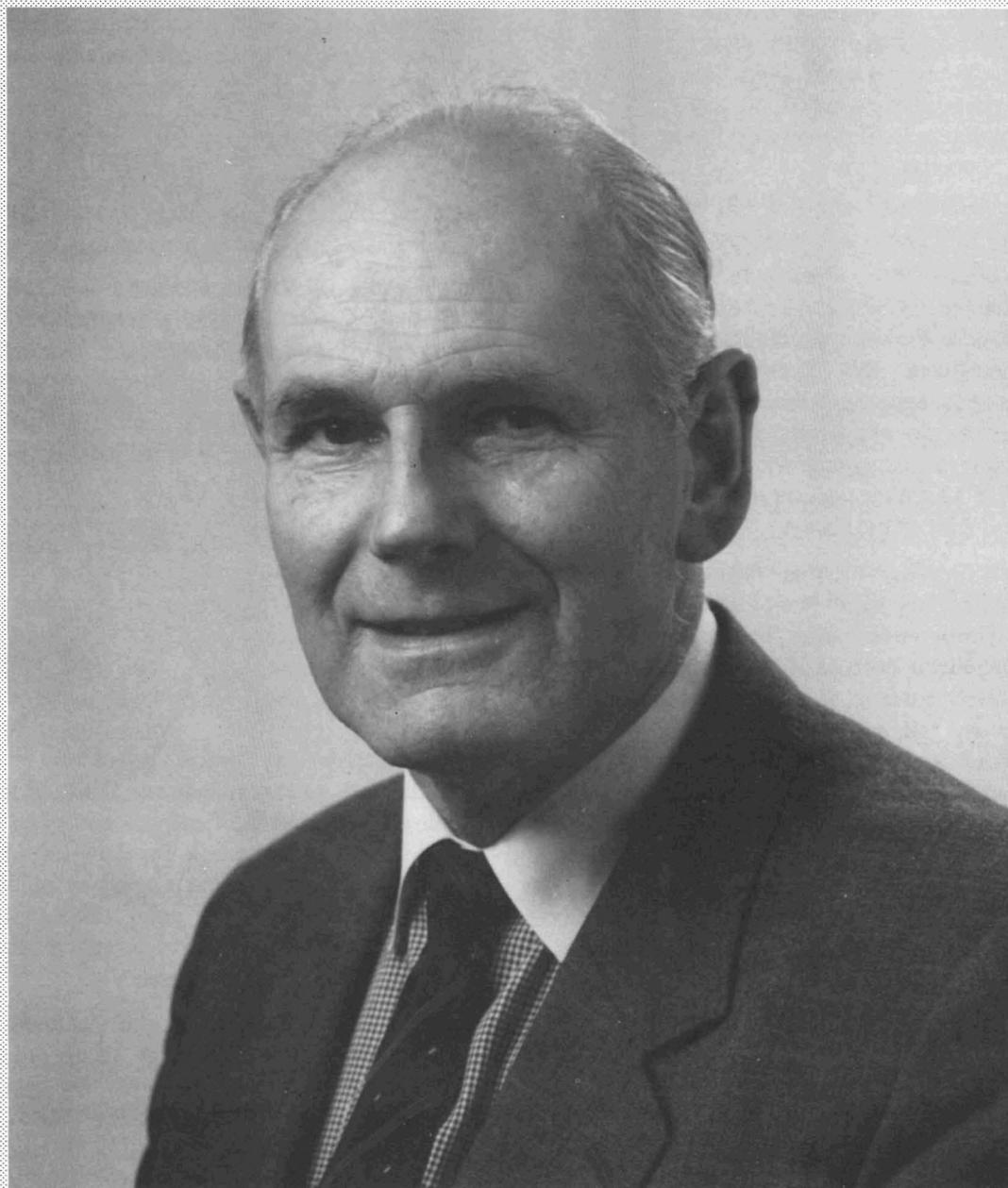


Profile: John Merriman



This Profile celebrates both the man and his work. John Merriman contemplates pending retirement with considerable relish, looking forward to having more time to develop his interests in walking and the countryside, amateur dramatics, Country and Western, the joys of wine tasting and the delights of seeking out the occasional pint of real ale. In between times he has agreed to act as part-time

relations consultant for Blackwell's. John relishes the thought of another couple of years involvement in the world of serials but, equally, he is determined to build up his work with the Holiday Fellowship for which he will shortly present himself on a Walk Leaders Selection Course, in the Lake District. Like many exiled Northerners he contemplates with pleasure the prospect of having more time for

walking in the hills of Derbyshire and Lakeland.

John's early life carried with it many problems and disappointments. He was only young when his father died and he had an invalid mother to care for. As an only child the burden of looking after his mother and a large house near Macclesfield proved to be heavy and he was unable to take a place at St John's, Cambridge. His early career ambition to become a farmer was not feasible; instead he drifted into libraries after a period of National Service which took him to Singapore. He has no nostalgic or fond memories of life in the R.A.S.C. and would be no supporter of any "Bring Back National Service" campaign.

He pitched into the trainee life at Newcastle upon Tyne Public Library with some enthusiasm at both the working and social levels and remembers Bill Tynemouth with great affection. Subsequently he became a student at the Newcastle School of Librarianship at the time John Ingham left for Manchester and Bill Caldwell took over. Wilf Lancaster and Jimmy Thompson were contemporaries on the course.

John's first professional post was in the Newcastle Reference Library where one of his colleagues was Keith Harris, who later became Polytechnic Librarian. Maybe because of his love of the country and certainly because of his desire to control his own destiny and escape the "dead-man's shoes" atmosphere in a large public library setting, John attempted to find an opening in the North Riding mobile library service. When this was not possible and with the mounting frustration of working through an FLA by examination, which he rightly saw as a "re-hash", he decided to advertise his qualities in the "Bookseller" (a sophisticated version of getting on his bike, I suppose) and received replies from Dublin and Oxford, the latter taking him to Blackwell's which, at the time, 1955, boasted a seven-strong periodicals department with a turnover of £200,000. Having started his career working in a republic he happily settled into a monarchy, and never regretted the change.

The timing was exemplary as the serials bonanza was about to begin. John's arrival marked the start of a rapid growth in business and a constant moving of location as old manual systems outgrew limited accommodation. The rest of the story need hardly be recounted: a directorship in 1967, computerisation in 1971 and a growth in serials business to a level over £50m. per year.

Fortunately, the demands on John's time did not prevent his developing the wider view. He was

acutely aware of the need to talk to publishers and was also fiercely concerned about the needs of library customers: "breaking down barriers" became almost a crusade with him. Out of this philosophy came involvement with serials worldwide and direct participation in the setting up or development of organisations capable of achieving synthesis. He was the first member of Blackwell's staff to attend a conference, namely, Aslib's in 1958, and later became an active member and officer of the Association of Subscription Agents, founded in 1934 in an attempt "to control unlimited price competition". John is proud of the fact that he was instrumental in persuading the ASA to extend membership to overseas agents.

Readers of this journal will know of John's part in the setting up of UKSG. He felt that before 1975 elements of the serials world did not communicate effectively and persuaded Richard Blackwell to support a gathering of university serials personnel who were to be addressed by such figures as Robert Maxwell, who told the audience if he only had one subscriber to *Tetrahedron* they would have to pay an annual subscription of £1,000,000. The librarians went away talking enthusiastically of the need to form a Serials Group but somehow nothing much happened. Enter John Merriman to organize a follow-up session which was held with great success in 1977, with an even wider audience. This time a working Group went away to form the UKSG and the first Conference was held in York in 1978. Needless to say, John was involved from the first and took over the Conference organisation, an onerous but satisfying task. Southampton 1990 will be his last Conference as Organizer and there is some trepidation at his going. Fortunately, his handbook outlining procedures and requirements will be available to his successors.

In 1984 he welcomed sixteen American serial librarians to the UKSG Conference. They formed a nucleus of those interested in setting up a North American Serials Interest Group. With John's advice and fellowship, John Riddick and others were able to found NASIG, which has become a strong, active organisation. The Australian equivalent, ASSIG, is now active and the first European Serials Conference will be held this year in Amsterdam. While John remains modest about his own contribution, it can be conjectured that without his foresight and dedication the world of serials would be much less cohesive and a good deal less active. Although not avowedly a technical man, John has strongly influenced the development of electronic communication and the agreeing of

International Standards between agents and publishers. It came as no surprise, therefore, when he was awarded the Bowker/Ulrich Serials Librarianship Award in 1989 for "leadership in serials - related activities" and for the fostering of "advances leading to a better understanding of the serials field". He was the first recipient outside the USA and librarianship, a most significant and well-deserved tribute.

John looks forward to the next period and views the future with optimism. He envisages difficulties with pricing levels and publishers' discounts and is certain that there will be fewer, bigger agents competing for business. Librarians, he says, will demand more value added service, and new technology will feature large, but he is confident that the printed journal will remain a strong force into the next century, but only the best will survive.

He plans "to stagger to all UKSG Conferences" as long as he is able - I take this to mean well into the next century, looking at the fit frame and twinkling eye - and to throw himself into a range of activities which make others happy. He loves his village-based interests, walking and good food and drink - the only anti-American sentiment passing his lips was to do with the quality of their beers! At home, in his private moments he will renew his acquaintance with Dolly Parton, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson. When not involved in the politics of the parish pump he will be caring for the

flowers and vegetables in his garden and helping Ina his wife, run her growing personalised tour business for discerning Americans called the Cotswold Experience, so he will be keeping the American connection. John enjoys happy films - "Crocodile Dundee", "The Rain Man", "Local Hero", concerts, the "National Geographic" and entertaining. Having lost his first wife who died from cancer when she was thirty four, he subsequently re-married; his family life and five grown-up children are terribly important to him, as are his many, many friends and contacts throughout the world. There will be rejoicing to hear of his acceptance of the part-time consultancy; I only hope he can squeeze everything in. My final question - "What are your favourite real ales" elicited the reply "Hook Norton" of Oxfordshire and "Boddington" of Lancashire. Do I detect regional bias?

One final thought: if John had possessed the necessary capital in the 1960's and had set up Merriman Serials who knows what the UK scene might have been. One thing is certain, his market share would have registered on the Richter Scale because of his professionalism, business acumen and personality - he could hardly have failed. □

J. Cowley.