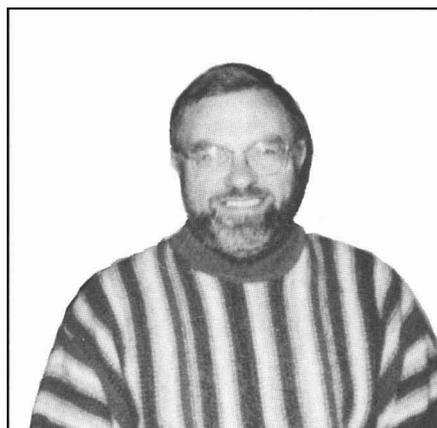# Profile

John Urquhart

Having accepted the brief to interview John Urquhart[1], the next task was to contact him to arrange a mutually convenient time - a task more difficult than at first thought. John took early retirement from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the Spring. It was late summer when I finally managed to track him down soon after he had returned from five weeks holiday with friends in Aquitaine. One Saturday morning we settled down with coffee and home-made plum jam (I'd been promised scones, but had to make do with bread rolls) and discussed the usual things one does with old friends who haven't seen each other for a while (we only live in the same area of the same city, but ...). It took an hour to catch up on old times, but then I had to see The Conservatory - yes, some of you will remember John's dream of creating a 'battery' to trap solar heat under the floor of a conservatory to be built on the south side of his house. The floor boards were there at last, arranged in segments into a semi-circle. The place looked about ready to be 'lived in', although there was no furniture in it, and there was a slight problem with drips from the glass roof (it was raining!). Maybe next time I go ...

John and I agreed that we would not go over similar ground to his previous profile. Instead, I asked him to look back over his career and to consider some of the most significant developments in the library and information science field in that time. His immediate response was CD-ROM, because, he said, "it is possible to store the whole of the world's literature on about

six tons of CD-ROMS." But CD-ROM was not just about storage. John found it exciting because, for him, it heralded the onset of the digitisation - or electronic form - of the word.

The second major development concerned the fact that, because of the Internet, every person can now become a publisher. However, he is concerned at the lack of a common 'finding' language, as he calls it, without which there is a Tower of Babel effect. Also, not much thought seems to have been given to archiving the information available on the networks. He feels that librarians have an important role to play here - since, in his opinion, librarianship is about retrieving objects.

John then launched into his theory of the entropy of information - 'the amount of disorder in the system increases by the square of the amount of information in the system'. Thus we have chaos! As the amount of information increases, more energy is required to organise it and control it. According to him, everyone is adding to this problem of chaos. Different people are involved in producing the information and they are using different rules to create it. If you find what you are looking for, then you believe the system is working. It is only when you cannot find the information that you realise the system is chaotic.

He considers that access to information is another key issue. Everyone should have the right to access any aspect of information - in its widest sense. His argument is that true democracy depends on this wider access. But, in his opinion, there isn't any broad-based democratic information system operating in

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[1]   This was the second time, in fact! The first interview I carried out, also on behalf of the UKSG, was published in the first issue of *Serials* back in March 1988 (Volume 1 No 1) and so, if you want to know a bit more about how John came into Library work, you are referred back to that issue.

society at present. Information systems tend to be producer-oriented rather than consumer-oriented. Decisions about the information are made by the producers. Librarians have traditionally been the mediators between the producers and the end users - the consumers - but they have little power to represent the needs of the consumers.

I asked John to discuss his involvement in the UK Serials Group.[2] He replied that it was important to remember how the Group started, without any ties to any bureaucratic machinery. At first, the Group could be said to have been a 'parasitic' organisation, relying on the goodwill of other organisations. Perhaps as a result of these initial constraints, it developed into a good broker, dealing fairly with all parties. He feels that the UKSG has emerged as a very effective organisation. Every effort is made to cost courses and conferences in true economic terms. A broad spectrum of interests is represented within the membership. Participants in its activities are very creative and constructive and the committee meetings were always a joy to work in as everyone cooperated from their different walks of life. John considers John Merriman (JBM) to have been very important to the Group's development. JBM's philosophy underpinned the Group's creation. He described that as a process of social awareness which was at the opposite pole to the modern dictat apparently followed by many, where (with due acknowledgement to Oscar Wilde) people know the "price of everything and the value of nothing".

He went on to talk about *Serials*. He sees the journal as a meeting point for all interested parties, producing and transferring information. He referred to it as the 'flagship' of the serials world. The serials format was going to be increasingly important if only to combat the growing chaos of information. All serials are in a

recognisable format; they are accessible; and they provide regularity into the system.

At this point, he started reminiscing about the annual conferences of the Group. We discussed the various venues we had experienced and then recalled the parties of the past! He wondered if the 'younger' generation would have the stamina to emulate the 'old-timers' (I tried not to feel too old codger-ish at this point). He admitted to budgeting for a maximum of twelve hours sleep over the four days of the conference, and sometimes not even achieving that! He enjoyed working on the conference 'songs' and recalled that their reception varied over the years from muted to rapturous. Most of all, John enjoyed the opportunity to meet up with committee and other members at the conferences. He would often try out new ideas and theories on these occasions. I certainly remembered that we were sure of a questioner from the audience after any conference paper, when John was about... He admitted that he was in no doubt that his UKSG contacts made his job as Head of Acquisitions at Newcastle University Library easier and more pleasant, facilitating business transactions, and so on.

I asked him where he thought the UKSG should be going from here. His reply was a surprise. He explained that he had no advice to offer. When he retired, he realised that the first thing he had to do was to let go. He knew that he had to let other people do it their own way, and that it would be unwise to advise them what to do. They would make mistakes or not!

He finished the interview with a personal maxim:

> "Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a country where every time you go to the bank to put in £1 you could take out £10. We do! The country is called 'Earth' and the currency is 'Knowledge'."

Thanks, John. Happy retirement!

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[2]   John was a founder member of the Group, serving on the Committee from 1978 until 1993. He was also the Group's first Treasurer.

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