

# A Career in Librarianship: Professor John Dean

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## Introduction

*John Dean is a well-known and highly esteemed figure in national and international library circles. When I worked in Sierra Leone, the director of the Institute of Library Studies at the University very quickly asked me if I was acquainted with John. This was despite the fact that it was then over twenty-five years since John had worked in West Africa and he had never worked in Sierra Leone.*

*This article is based on discussions I had with John and from reading his published work. While it presents a brief overview of his very interesting career, the focus is on the major contribution John made to the development of libraries and library education in Africa.*

*I am extremely grateful to John for his willingness to share his experiences and to his daughter Susannah for her hospitality and assistance.*

*The article is written in the first person.*

## Early Years

I was born in 1924 in Dorchester, Dorset, the town Hardy made famous as Casterbridge. My mother's family, the Kellys, had come from Ireland to Cardiff, Wales. She knew Thomas Hardy and had tea with him on a number of occasions. He sent her letters but sadly she did not keep them. Hardy died when I was about two or three years old. I was an only child. My father fought in the First World War, serving in Greece and Iraq, then part of the Turkish Empire.

## A Career in Libraries

After leaving school in 1943, I joined the RAF. Some of my three-year posting was spent in Iceland and that convinced me I'd like to live in a warm country! I was released from the RAF to go to University. I was awarded two scholarships to Oxford, where I studied politics, philosophy and economics at St. John's College. After that I went to the nearby University of Southampton as a type of apprentice to Marjory Henderson, the then Librarian. Nowadays, this would probably be termed a graduate traineeship. I took the professional qualifications of the Library Association during my three years at Southampton, gaining my associateship in 1953. That was the way it was then. There were no postgraduate courses in librarianship.

## Off to Khartoum

My first African experience was as Deputy Librarian in the University of Khartoum from 1953 until 1956. Khartoum, with Egypt, was a dominion administered by Britain. Just getting there was interesting! The ship docked first in Nice, then Malta, Libya and Wadi Halfa in Sudan.

As soon as I arrived, the Librarian, Michael Jolliffe announced that he was going on holidays for two months leaving me in charge. He told me a staff strike was imminent as there was unhappiness about salaries. While I got a local salary, that was supplemented from Britain. I decided to learn Arabic, the language of the majority of the staff, as quickly as possible in order to be able to communicate effectively. Fortunately the strike was averted.

I worked in all areas in the University Library. About 50% of library staff were expatriates. I was involved with Michael Jolliffe in the development of a syllabus for library assistant training. Graduates could take the U.K. professional body examinations. Some colonial officials saw the move to train local staff to take positions of authority as dangerous. Indeed, many university staff were regarded as dangerously liberal by the British colonial authorities and by some of the Sudanese Arabs. I was keen in Khartoum, and in my subsequent posts, to train local people to assume leadership positions.

I spent an interesting three years there before moving back to London. My successor was a Sudanese man, a graduate of the University of Ghana, with a postgraduate qualification in librarianship from the University of London.

## The London Library

I worked for five years in the London Library in St. James' Square, the world's largest independent lending library. It was set up in 1841 by Thomas Carlyle and allowed subscribers have something akin to the collection of a national library for use in their own homes. Early members included Dickens and George Eliot. When I was there E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot and Rupert Hart-Davis were members, as indeed was the Queen Mother.

## Ghana – A New Nation

Ghana was my next port of call, with my wife Miriam and daughter Susannah. We were there for four years – from 1961



Farewell Party,  
Accra, 1965

to 1965. The University of Legon was a new university as indeed were all the universities where I worked in Africa. While institutions of higher learning were not new in West Africa, comprehensive university and library systems came into their own between 1950 and 1970. I've written a chapter on this development in *Comparative and International Librarianship* (Dean 1970).

Ghana – formerly the Gold Coast – was at the height of an intellectual renaissance, having just gained independence from Britain. President Nkrumah, like other post-independence rulers in West Africa, knew that a literate and informed public was necessary for economic and political progress. He was very enthusiastic about libraries and often visited the Library at the University, where I met him on a number of occasions. Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, Che Guevara all visited. Life on campus was interesting. Conor Cruise O'Brien was our very excellent vice-chancellor. I remember his daughter Kate coming on holidays. At some point during my time there Queen Elizabeth and Prince

Philip visited. I was given the job of showing them around the University. The Asanti Paramount Chief also called to the Library.

Both the University of Ghana and the University of Ibadan (Nigeria) where I subsequently worked were linked to the University of London and awarded UL degrees. The thinking was that new universities should have the support of established universities, until they had gained sufficient academic experience to award their own degrees. In the sixties, it was felt that higher education in Ghana was exclusive. Not enough graduates were being produced to take key positions previously held by expatriates. The syllabi on offer in the university were orientated towards Europe rather than Africa. To deal with this, the range of subjects was extended, the annual intake of students increased and an Institute of African Studies established. I provide more detailed information on the Library in articles in *Ghana Library Journal* (Dean 1964), *Nigerian Libraries* (Dean 1967) and a chapter in *Five Years Work in Librarianship* (Dean 1968).

## Establishing Library Education Programmes

There was a tremendous sense of optimism all around and I enjoyed my four years very much. I was university Librarian and was actively involved with Ronald Bengé and Eve Evans in setting up a Library School, under the aegis of the Ghana Library Board. The biggest challenge facing librarianship in English-speaking West Africa was the scarcity of professionally trained staff. Potential librarians were sent to the U.K. for

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professional training. This was expensive and was very limited in terms of numbers. Some of the course material studied was, perhaps, not that relevant to the reality on the ground in West Africa. There were different opinions on how best professional education for librarianship should be provided. I had no doubt that the sort of course which was tailor-made for the needs of Africa and took into consideration local conditions would be a better preparation for African graduates than overseas study. This view was reinforced by a seminar in Ibadan in 1954, sponsored by UNESCO. The West African Library Association (WALA) asked the Carnegie Corporation for funding to establish a formal library school. In 1957, Harold Lancour carried out a survey of libraries in West Africa (Lancour 1958). He suggested that conditions now existed for the formal establishment of a Library School, which should be attached to the newly established University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Nigeria was to be my next port of call. I took up the post of Director of Professional Education at Ibadan University in 1965. In that same year the Department of Library Studies was established at the University of Ghana. This incorporated the Library School of the Ghana Library Board.

## Nigeria – A New West African Experience

As with Ghana, I went to Nigeria with the Council for Overseas Education, now the British Council.

The Institute of Library Studies came under my remit as Director of Professional Education. The Institute received a grant of \$88,000 from the Carnegie Corporation in 1960. This was supplemented, in 1963, with a further grant of \$112,000. This facilitated a major breakthrough – the introduction of a

new syllabus no longer determined by the requirements of the British Library Association, but designed to meet the specific needs of Nigeria. By 1965, the Institute had produced fifty-two librarians. I've written in some detail about the development of this and other library education programmes in *Education for Information* (Dean 1983).

I knew it was vital to develop African leaders for the profession across West Africa. I wanted to give research a high priority in the programme. Very little research had been undertaken into library issues/problems that were specifically African. The number of special libraries and documentation centres attached to government departments, industry and commercial companies, research institutions and universities in West Africa was growing, yet there was no training for documentalists in the social sciences. I've written about this issue in some detail in *Nigerian Libraries* (Dean ). There was also a real need to develop formal standards relating to buildings, automation and national bibliography. Designing a syllabus to meet the needs of Nigeria and other West African countries was exciting and challenging. More details on this can be found in my book *Planning Library Education Programmes* (Dean 1972) and my articles in *West African Journal of Education* (Dean 1968) and *UNESCO Bulletin for Libraries* (Dean 1968).

Both expatriate and Nigerian staff worked in the Institute. I was keen to have Nigerian people trained to run the school after I left. We were there to hand over to the new professionals in these new nations. Building relationships was crucial. I linked up with the staff of the National Library and tried to ensure that links were strengthened between library educators and the library profession, as I did later in Dublin. I worked with Wilfred Plumbe, who died in 2008. He was University Librarian at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Northern Nigeria and Past President of the Library Association of Nigeria.

## Outbreak of the Biafran War

National conflict developed during our time in Nigeria. The Ibo ethnic group wanted their territory, Biafra, to become independent from Nigeria. While I was in a different part of the country, it was a very dangerous time. The situation was tense. I was investigated by the police, our home searched and there was a high level of tension all the time. There were curfews, roadblocks, school closures and shortages, and we had friends who lost loved ones. The television featured the Nigerian leader General Gowon, urging everyone to 'Go On With Our Nigeria'. Despite all these challenges the University was surging forward.

I travelled around Nigeria with Miriam and Susannah. We went to the North to Kano, an amazing city to look at, and then across the Jos Plateau, via Zaria and down to Benin and eventually back round to Ibadan.

## Visiting the United States

While in Nigeria, I got a Carnegie Corporation Grant to visit North American universities for three months. This allowed me learn about best practice in education for the profession and to see African collections in U.S. libraries. The MARC programme had

just been established at the Library of Congress. The vision of making catalogue records available worldwide was an exciting one. I got main entry cards (this was all that was available) for use in Ibadan. Added entries had to be made by typing the required heading at the top of the main card. The availability of this type of record was a major breakthrough in librarianship. At that time I wrote about the concept of a “cataloguer’s camera” – a means by which catalogue entries might be reproduced quickly and expeditiously (Dean 1966). Nowadays, central cataloguing services are the norm and perhaps younger librarians don’t realise how significant these developments were.

My visit to the United States sparked my interest in computer applications. I could see that the advent of the computer would change the face of information. I introduced information technology into the Ibadan curriculum, at an elementary level. We stayed in Nigeria for five years, leaving in 1970. That was an interesting period.

## Interlude in Australia

I was appointed the first head of the Department of Library Studies at the Western Australia Institute of Technology, now Curtin University of Technology, in Perth. I’ve written about the programme there in *WAIT Gazette* (Dean 1973). During my six years lecturing (1971–77), I was also external examiner to a number of universities and carried out advisory work in Singapore, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines.

I was on the Commonwealth Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications Expert Panel and served on various groups of the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services. Between 1971 and 1976, I was part of a seven-member group of the Library Association of Australia (LAA), charged with responsibility for professional accreditation in Australia.

While based in Australia I was asked to carry out some work in Eastern Africa.

## Back to Africa

In Eastern Africa library development emerged more slowly, and library education programmes came into existence somewhat more haphazardly than in West Africa.

West Africa’s progress was due, in no small measure, to the foresight of African political leaders, the enthusiasm and commitment of local librarians and the generous financial support of the Carnegie Corporation.

By 1970 there was no library school in Eastern Africa comparable to the University of Ibadan. Most East Africans seeking professional qualifications suitable for university library employment had to study overseas. Government and aid agencies were spending substantial funding which, it was felt, could be better invested in developing postgraduate programmes in Africa, designed specifically with African requirements in mind. The Ford Foundation agreed to finance an investigation into the feasibility of establishing a postgraduate programme in an East African country.

In 1974 I took on the task of preparing the preliminary report on setting up a library school serving English-speaking East African countries – Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. In addition to advising on curriculum, staffing needs and other aspects of setting up a library school, I was to recommend the best location. It was quite a daunting task, covering an area with a total population of about ninety million, but also a very exciting one. I recommended Addis Ababa, Ethiopia as the location for a library school.

## University College Dublin

I took up the post of Professor and Head of the Department of Library and Information Studies in UCD in 1977 and held that until 1989. I’ve written about the programmes, the syllabus and departmental activity in *An Leabharlann* (Dean 1978). More recently, the development of the UCD programme and professional education for Irish librarians has been documented in *An Leabharlan* (Ellis-King 2008). While at UCD, I was also Head of the Department of Computer Science, the International Office, and chair of the Computer Services Board for considerable

‘... the advent of the computer would change the face of information.’

periods. I continued to teach Management of Libraries and Information Agencies and to mentor students until 2005.

## Reflection

I feel the future of library education, worldwide, lies in the World Wide Web and eLearning. Developing quality eLearning resources is very expensive but necessary. There’s a need for constant updating, particularly in the area of information technology. While some print collections will always be needed, electronic resources, particularly eJournals, will supersede the need for developing large collections. More co-operation and collaboration and exchanges with African libraries should be encouraged. There is a lot we can share with and learn from universities in Africa and elsewhere in the Developing World.

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# Professor John Dean's acceptance speech on the occasion of the award of Honorary Fellowship by the Library Association of Ireland

**Thursday, 23rd October, 2008**

My first library post was as a Library Assistant for six weeks and I was then promoted to Assistant Librarian at Southampton University Library.

Soon after that, I became Deputy Librarian at the University of Khartoum. Later, I moved on to become Deputy Librarian at the London Library, and later again, Librarian at the University of Ghana in Accra. Here, I met the Carnegie Corporation representative Carol White, who arranged the finance for a tour of the United States, in preparation for my first educational post. This was the Directorship of the Institute of Librarianship, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

After Nigeria, I took up the post of Head of the Department of Library Studies, at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University) in Perth, Western Australia. Maintaining my third world involvement, I visited Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, under government sponsorship, to advise on library education. The Ford Foundation sponsored a further journey to countries of Southern Africa.

It has always been my ambition to take only short-term contracts, so that after setting up the library schools, their ownership and management would be taken over by the locally-based population. I succeeded in every case except in Australia. This difficulty, however, has since been made good.

In Ireland, I expected to find this to be another short-term contract, but as you see, I have made an exception. I retired in 1989 and then worked in International Affairs at UCD, for 12 years.

My present interests are to see the flourishing of e-learning and a recognition of, and commitment to, the full costing of such an undertaking. My impression is that nowhere is e-learning adequately funded. I have in mind a global span and also a desire to see hegemony in association with UCD and UK libraries and beyond.

This Honorary Fellowship award is, in fact, a credit to Professors Mary Burke and Michael Casey, and to Bob Pearce. (The latter two, now retired). This award is also a credit to Ian Cornelius, the current Head of School, and to Barbara Traxler-Brown, one time Acting Head of Department, and of course the people they appointed. I can be proud of the achievement of the School.



Congratulations to Marjory Sliney and Deirdre Ellis-King on the production of their superb 80th Anniversary special issue magazine. I was also pleased to see some coverage of the School included in this special publication.

I was also particularly aware of Marian Keyes' contribution to the production of the 80th anniversary magazine.

Thanks to everyone.

**Prof John Dean with his daughter Susannah Hanlon (standing left) and Deirdre Ellis-King**

**Photo: Alastair Smeaton**