



A woman of SIGNIFICANCE

Bodley's librarian Sarah Thomas is too busy to arrange books on her study shelves, so they remain conspicuously sparse bar a few volumes inherited from her predecessor and two photographs of her with Bill and Hilary Clinton. Sandra Fraser met the woman charged with taking Oxford University Library Services, home to 11 million printed items and rising, forward into the 21st century.

Photography by Mark Fairhurst

WHEN Sarah Thomas was appointed Bodley's Librarian this year, having been headhunted from Cornell University, the media, national and local, trumpeted that she had broken through two barriers – she was the first female and the non-British person to hold the post in its 400-year history.

Sarah is much more down-to-earth about

these facts:

“I don't perceive that I've broken a barrier,” she says. “I'm the same person I was when I was five years old – I'm trying to do my best whenever I can... I've never felt personally that I've been held back by gender. You have to remember too, that 'librarian' is traditionally a female-dominated profession.”

Of being foreign, she notes that the university and the city have a truly international population and on her arrival at the Bodleian, she discovered that her childhood next-door-neighbour and playmate was honoured on a roll of beneficiaries of the library. It's a daily reminder of home and where she grew up in Massachusetts. ►

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enjoy the books they read, and enjoy the environment they read in.

Our tour takes us on a Harry-Potter-in-Gringotts descent through the New Bodleian. Sarah, I note, has learnt to be diplomatic about Sir Giles Gilbert Scott’s 1930s design. Having originally dubbed it an ‘awful building’ she agrees it has some architectural merits – it’s Grade 2 listed – but as part of the library’s renovation plans, she wants the ceremonial door to open and the ugly concrete apron outside to go, along with the overcrowded books and stacks that represent a health and fire hazard. It will become less tomb-like and more open, she hopes. My hope is that the merits of the marvellous Heath-Robinson-like conveyor belt and pneumatic Lamson tube system used to deliver and request books respectively are preserved. The subterranean chambers form part of the building’s 11 floors, spreading out under Broad Street. The entrance to these reminds staff to tell their colleagues where they are, together with instructions to follow the yellow lines to an exit if they get lost.

Once inside one understands the need for the new book depository, due to be built on the Osney Mead industrial site alongside other warehouses, but currently causing concern among city heritage experts who fear it might ruin Oxford’s skyline – though the plans show it’s far enough from the city centre not to intrude and actually much prettier than the warehouses surrounding it.

Sarah has had many such problems to juggle since her arrival in Oxford but these are balanced with great pleasures too. She didn’t arrive with a desire to see a particular manuscript or document so has delighted in items that she simply didn’t know the Bodleian held within its vaults. I ask which has most enchanted her.

“It’s a small notebook that was written, in her own fair hand, by a young girl when she

was 11 or 12 to her step-mother as a New Year’s gift and the young girl was Elizabeth the First giving it to Catherine Parr,” she replies. She thinks further and, not surprisingly, remarks on the Gettysburg address, written in Lincoln’s hand in 1863, originals of which are held at the Library of Congress and Cornell University. She has seen American dignitaries reduced to tears before it and her mind is clearly whirring as she continues:

“We [The Bodleian] own the oldest surviving book written in the English language from the court of King Alfred the Great from the 9th century translated from the Latin... you think about what that means to an American. It seems unfathomable...”

It’s items like these that Sarah wants the public, not just scholars or academics, to see, even if they’re behind glass.

Her own favourite read is Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë and she particularly likes Jill Ker Conway’s True North, a memoir about growing up in the Australian Outback.

“I like these stories about very strong women,” she laughs.

Sarah’s personal collection of fiction has been shipped from America to her new home in Oxfordshire but she’s left the majority of her library back in the US, content to shop in Oxford for new books – the bookshops are such a pleasure.

So does she like the UK and her new job? Have there been any nasty surprises?

“I think that I understood how wonderful it would be. I knew it would be a challenge – I wanted the challenge. What I didn’t understand was what it is like to live here every day in England. This courtyard, the music, the theatres, the people – who are just extraordinary individuals,” she says.

Sarah is mindful of Thomas Bodley’s original aim when he created the library. He knew he couldn’t replace Duke Humfrey’s manuscripts, destroyed in the Civil War, so he cajoled, encouraged and invited beneficiaries to contribute to his new library’s contents, which he wanted to be used by anyone seeking information, regardless of their origins.

When people walk down Broad Street and Cate Street years hence Sarah wants them to see a modern library in operation, something open and inviting to all people.

“Bodley’s object was not to get the original manuscripts back, but to create this resource that would serve the Republic of the Learned,” she explains.

It seems as fitting an occupation today as it was 400 years ago – and this Bodley’s Librarian seems just the woman to get the task done in the modern era. ■

Bodleian Library, Broad Street, Oxford. Tel: 01865 277000. www.bodley.ox.ac.uk

Sarah’s engineer and teacher parents valued education and encouraged her reading habit.

“I would walk from my house down to this one-room library and return with a stack of books,” she says. After exhausting Haydenville’s library she started travelling to the next library town, and the next...

“We just always, always, had books and papers around,” she says.

As a student at the all-women Smith College, she entered the world of the librarian through a classmate’s encouragement. Her first task was to bookplate a collection of papers and books dealing with women’s birth control – at that time still illegal in the state and though she insists she has had no career strategy, it sparked Sarah’s interest and imagination and she went on to Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the National Agricultural Library and the Library of Congress. This year she was awarded the Melvil Dewey Medal – Dewey was the inventor of the library classification system that still bears his name – recognising her contribution to the profession.

That is Sarah’s history – but her future and that of the Bodleian is currently exercising hearts and minds in Oxfordshire. The Bodleian is physically and metaphorically at the heart of Oxford with buildings and architecture to inspire and delight – but far underground lies a mass of books, papers and journals, not necessarily in the best of conditions. Reform is essential and Sarah feels that people don’t understand what it means to be adding three miles of bookshelves to the Bodleian’s collections a year – and have no notion of the delicate state some of the older material has deteriorated into.

The Bodleian has remained very much a ‘Shhhhhhhh’ library and has stuttered into the 21st century clinging to many traditions whose origins are impenetrable. When Sarah is showing us around Duke Humfrey’s Library, built in the 1400s and which still houses books in Bodley’s original bookcases dating back to around 1602, we are given the hard stare by readers who clearly regard our presence, let alone Sarah’s sotto voce descriptions, a distraction.

Sarah has had to remind both herself and, at times, her colleagues, that she is now in charge, especially where archaic rules and regulations are concerned. She’s managed to get drinks of water allowed during long and arduous meetings – refreshments were banned because a long-removed treasured Persian carpet was once housed in the same room, but it took persistence on her part to discover why the rule existed when it didn’t make sense in the modern world. One wonders how high eyebrows will be raised when she reveals her plan to create a coffee bar complete with squashy sofas within the library environs, but she wants people to

