

Philip Harris: Accomplished Librarian and Acclaimed Historian of the British Museum Library

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Philip Harris died on 21 July 2018. For forty years he served the British Museum Library (BML) and its successor the British Library (BL) in increasingly senior roles. He then wrote a history of the BML which is not only definitive but also irreplaceable.

Joining its Department of Printed Books (DPB) in 1947, he worked in various branches and began to specialize particularly in acquisitions policies and processes. His administrative and diplomatic abilities were also required as BM Assistant Secretary to the redoubtable Secretary Bentley Bridgewater from 1959 to 1962 and as Deputy Superintendent of the famous Reading Room from 1963 to 1965, for a long period working too under the leadership of Sir Frank Francis, the BML's last great figure and its chief modernizer in those years. Had Francis still been in office in the early 1970s – he retired as BM Director in 1968 – Phil always thought he would have been a considerable influence on the ideas and ways of the BL in that period.

The skills Phil honed in those two posts were vital in dealing with eminent BM Trustees and a demanding international readership: both groups being capable of volatility. Though remaining his own man, he retained this capacity for balance throughout his career. In his excellent 1979 'booklet' (as Phil referred to it) on the history of the Reading Room he quoted an earlier definition of the ideal Superintendent: 'a combination of a scholar, a gentleman, a police constable and a boatswain's mate'. Phil always fulfilled the first two descriptions, occasionally showing the warning lion's paw of the last two.

The advent of the BL in 1973 by Act of Parliament of the previous year was unwelcome to many of the BML's old guard, some of whom indeed never came to terms with it. Nothing so transforming, after all, had been experienced by the BML since Sir Anthony Panizzi's dynamism and vision had swept it on to a further level of greatness well over a century before. Whatever his private reservations however (and there were certainly some!), Phil offered unstintingly his knowledge and experience to the 'new men and women' as the new institution came together and thereby, with a good measure of success, impressed upon them the best traditions of the former BML. He had been appreciated by Francis and was then valued by Sir Harry Hookway, the BL's notable and assured first Chief Executive, and by Donovan Richnell, the much admired (not least by Phil) Director General. On an occasion during this time of great change when work pressures became greater than Phil wished, Hookway moved personally and swiftly to reassure him of the significant role he was playing in the new organization and of the trust placed in him.

Philip Rowland Harris, of a family that had settled in London's East End, was born on 19 December 1926 in Woodford, Essex. He would trace his family back to the 1770s and a forebear John Harris.

In writing this appreciation I am especially grateful for the help of Clare Lockyer, Philip Harris's elder daughter, and for the views and suggestions of my former BL colleagues Stephen Green and Dr Denis Reidy. Here and there their help has been extended to my borrowing some of their words and phrases. John Goldfinch has identified many items in the bibliography.



Fig. 1. P. R. Harris on his retirement. BL Corporate Archive, PH034-342.

They were largely West Country agricultural workers though some became prosperous bakers. Phil's grandfather Joseph moved to London to seek better fortune and married into a family that came from Yorkshire. Phil's father Rowland worked for the Post Office and held the Imperial Service Medal; his mother Maud, nee Leatham, was born in India as her father was in the Army there with the 18th Hussars. Other relatives of Phil's were to see notable war service. An uncle, notwithstanding a rather roving private life, was admired by Phil for fighting at Mons and other battles during the Great War and winning the Military Cross with the Middlesex Regiment. This uncle's son in turn was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in the World War and later joined the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), with which the DPB was to have dealings in the 1990s concerning a suppressed book in the Library's Private Case – and on which Phil's advice, even post-retirement, was valuable.

Phil was educated at St Anthony's School, Woodford, in 1932-37 and the Jesuit St Ignatius' College, Stamford Hill, during 1937-44. His Roman Catholic faith was to remain fundamental to his life. St Anthony's headmistress told him he must emulate his friend by winning a scholarship to St Ignatius' College, which he duly did. He and his friend would travel to and from school by trolleybus from Woodford (also requiring a mile and a half walk), often stopping on the way home to fool around a pond in the extension to Epping Forest – where Phil once fell through the ice. Even at St Anthony's, going home for lunch meant a two mile return journey for Phil and his brother. Schooldays at St Ignatius' were also interrupted by the school's wartime evacuation and, much more seriously, by Phil's injuries – especially a badly damaged left knee – sustained when a landmine destroyed his home in 1941. He spent four months in hospital. It was feared his leg would have to be amputated but, rather amazingly, it was saved. His left knee caused pain throughout his life but he did not refer to it much to colleagues and he eschewed painkillers.

Despite this trauma, he studied well at school. The injuries barred him from any military service and he entered the mainstream Civil Service at a junior grade. He was on his way to the BML and to accomplishments which he could scarcely have foreseen, even though there was a glimpse of them when with his appointment to higher executive officer he was said to be, at 24, the youngest one in the Civil Service. (He later transferred to the BM's museum keeper grades.)

While working full time in the BML he graduated in History from Birkbeck College in 1951, requiring considerable discipline in attending many evening lectures after completing a day's work (which included Saturday mornings and a daily journey to and from Westcliff near Southend), and was awarded his MA by the Institute of Historical Research in 1953 choosing as his subject 'English trade with the eastern Mediterranean in the late 16th century'. In the 1950s he belonged to the Newman Association, a national body and social centre whose members met to talk of and develop understanding of the Catholic faith, where he organized many regional conferences and events. There he met in 1954 Angela Resting, who taught music, and they began a most happy marriage in September 1960. Their children Clare, Martin and Katy completed the family and Phil took great pride in his grandchildren Laura, Max, Alice, Henry and Theo. Angela and Phil lived in Shenfield all their married life, over fifty years, in a house originally called 'Tall Trees' but which they quickly, and for Phil befittingly, renamed 'Campion' after Edmund Campion, the English Jesuit and Roman Catholic martyr and Thomas Campion the composer and poet, the latter celebrating Angela's musical interests as well as their shared faith. From childhood he enjoyed also a very close relationship with his brother Geoffrey (his parents had no other children) who shared many of his historical interests, had his own high achieving career in the Ministry of Defence and a distinguished reputation in the field of British naval history. His death in 2014 was a great loss to the family. For Phil it was like losing his right arm, his younger daughter said.

Senior BM figures had wished Phil might succeed Bridgewater as Secretary to the Trustees but his heart lay with his beloved DPB and after promotion to Deputy Keeper in 1966 he became successively head of the Acquisitions, English and North European and West European departments. On his watch the (non-UK) English and European collections grew dramatically. This was owed largely to the greater injection of money that the new BL received especially in the 1970s – the BML having been relatively starved of acquisition funds during a long period – but was also due to Phil's advocacy, budget management and willingness to give his language specialists full rein.

The expansion of acquisitions can be traced in several areas. Two good examples are the increased intake of English language publications, especially from North America, overseen by Ian Willison and then Stephen Green and their colleagues; and the great enlargement of the Italian (and modern Greek) collections, which had been constrained previously by lack of money and by conservatism in book selection, led by Denis Reidy. It was also pleasing to observe, when negotiating and arguing budgets with the BL's central administration, Phil's authoritative references to the 'basket of currencies' (a key foreign exchange comparator) and the intricacies of purchasing books from different parts of the world – even if occasionally a sophisticated style outlining foreign currency shifts elevated the substance!

Retiring from the BL in 1986, his greatest single achievement lay ahead. He embarked on a history of the BML from 1753 to 1973, an immense undertaking over eleven years, fulfilled with assiduous research and an admirably clear style of writing. It was published in 1998 to acclaim. As a history of that great Library it will never be surpassed. There is analysis and evaluative comment in its more than eight hundred pages but Phil's overall approach was to provide a treasure-trove of facts and context allowing readers and researchers significant scope to come to their own judgements and conclusions on the stages of the Library's history. An admiring review by Peter Hoare said that the book would 'allow the history to be seen in the details' but the 'impressive factual narrative, largely from archival sources' was not intended to 'evaluate the BML's role in intellectual history' (for example, its nurture of Karl Marx's thought and writing!). Hoare concluded it was 'a valuable contribution to the writing of library history, and will be drawn on by historians in many other fields'. Appreciation of the *History* was widespread in many quarters, from students of library history to a President of the American Library Association. As the select bibliography below records, Phil was to write separately of the methodology and labour involved in writing the BML's history. But on the road to publication he also gave a lecture on it in 1997 to the Bibliographical Society: this was well received, the Society's Hon. Secretary recording that '... it mixed erudition and entertainment in just the right way...'

This achievement in writing the BML history is the more to be regarded because shortly after he retired Phil was diagnosed with the blood cancer non-Hodgkin lymphoma. He thus began his researches in its considerable shadow and it speaks greatly for his determination and resilience – as well as the support of his family (and his faith) – that he still embraced the task he had set himself with such resolve. He feared initially that time would not allow him to complete the history. In the event, with close monitoring and despite the recurring anxiety of check-ups, the treatment and medication proved very successful and we were all to continue to share in the grace of Phil's person for a further thirty years.

Phil liked to present himself as a traditionalist and a conservative. But it was far from being his whole truth and picture. Along with the encouragement he gave, he had an intriguingly worldly understanding of people and could be especially adroit when handling forceful but fragile egos, of which he encountered not a few in the national library. He was not usually censorious and was always prepared to give advice both professional and personal in a quiet courteous manner, humour (occasionally somewhat caustic) not being far away. This combination of astuteness and tact explains the high regard in which he was held by those who worked for, or closely with, him. The loyalty he inspired was particularly pronounced among much younger colleagues, 'He was there for everyone,' said Angela Forester, his secretary for seven years: they saw his experience as a fount of knowledge and his person as a fount of friendship.

Equally, he had particular friendship and regard for Laurence Wood, a working generation older, who became Keeper of Printed Books and for whom Phil first worked in 1951; and for Harold Whitehead, his older contemporary, curator of the Hispanic collections. Two senior BL colleagues, from outside the BML tradition, with whom he also worked harmoniously were Ian Gibb and Kenneth Gibson, both of whom appreciated his knowledge and expertise. A distinguished consultant to the Library, Professor Robin Alston, would refer to him as 'Uncle Phil', an affectionate address implying the wisdom that Phil could show when situations became fraught. In this there was honesty and straightforwardness but also recognition of the politics that beset any institution, especially grand ones: 'the successful art of management is hypocrisy!' he told a sympathetic colleague. This was naturally a (half) joking reference but anyone who has worked in a multi-layered body will appreciate part, at least, of the insight.

Three manifest qualities, rarer than they should be, were bound together in Phil's heart and mind during his working life. The first was a natural kindness even when circumstances might be vexatious. A member of his staff, holder of trenchant views, objecting to some or other Library proposal, chose to intimate to Phil when the latter had much else on his mind that he was considering sending in his resignation to Sir Harry Hookway as a protest. Suspecting that such a billet-doux might be accepted by the Chief Executive to the detriment of the colleague's short and long term career, Phil took trouble to counsel him against – possibly likely – self-immolation: and the staff member sailed on with his productive career.

The second might be best captured by an old Welsh political maxim, freely translated as 'He and she who would lead must be a bridge'. Phil's was a bridging personality: between colleagues of the BML's enduring tradition and those of the vigorous new library agencies changing it; between younger staff starting out and those in the afternoon or evening of their careers; and, in displaying his friendliness towards both junior and senior grades and backgrounds (thus spurning any 'academic' and 'social' divide that was sometimes an unappealing trait of the 'old' BML in the earlier years of Phil's career).

The third was his deep pride in the best of the institution he loved. As he wrote 'Whatever its [BML's] faults, and of course it had faults, it had many virtues, and people were proud to work for it'. He remained affronted if anyone had besmirched the BML. James Mackay was a very knowledgeable curator of the BML's Philatelic collections and a fluent and prolific writer. In 1972 he pleaded guilty to stealing valuable proofs of stamps on loan from the Crown Agents, was fined £1,000 and dismissed from the British Museum. The betrayal of trust must have been felt especially keenly by a previous Principal Keeper, Robert Wilson, who had encouraged Mackay's career, protecting him on one earlier occasion from criticism by Jimmy Norton, head of DPB's administrative office (the 'Anteroom') and a friend much valued by Phil: 'Mind your own business, Norton,' Phil indignantly recalled Wilson saying. The scandal contributed to seriously undermining the health of the then Principal Keeper, the gifted Kenneth Gardner. Thirty years later, back in Scotland and continuing a successful publishing career, Mackay was accused of plagiarism in some of his biographies. Phil helped remind the Scottish media and publishing community of Mackay's earlier transgression. He would have seen it as the long arm of the BML reaching out to exact some further redress for a wrong committed so long before.

His faith guided Phil but it was never imposed upon his colleagues. His deep interest in his Church was only gleaned occasionally from a habit of referring to a Pope by his pre-papal cardinal's name. A long-time member of the Catholic Record Society and its Council and for a period Chairman of its Trustees, he wrote for its journal *Recusant History* (now called *British Catholic History*) and was one of their four editors of its volumes' series. With a handful of likeminded enthusiasts from the world of libraries and research such as Antony Allison, Dr David Rogers and Professor Tom Birrell he injected fresh blood into the Society's activities. He also wrote extensively for the *British Museum Quarterly* and *British Library Journal* and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. His last ambitious project, begun by his old friend and fellow enthusiast Tom Birrell of the Catholic University of Nijmegen and continued by Phil, concerned the contents of the Old Royal Library given to the BM by King George II in 1757: this, he knew, would now be completed by his friends as their further tribute to him.

A moment of memory lingers. In late 1987 Phil had begun his research for the BML history. At that time two of his children had been working for the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford II had just died: an obituarist of Ford wrote 'They said his name was on the building but the Company, too, dominated his waking thoughts'. I said to Phil, 'They'll say similar of you one day, after you've written the BML's history'. He laughed it off with that sudden infectious laugh. But I was right. For, after his love for his family, affection for his friends, commitment to his Church and his historical interests, the values and culture of the BML and BL were a dominating thread of Phil's life. And by his writing the magisterial history of a great library of the world, in a very real sense, it is Philip Harris's name that is on the building.

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¹ No attempt has been made to list P. R. Harris's publications on Catholic history, for which see Michael Hodgetts, 'Philip Harris (1926-2018)', *British Catholic History*, xxxiv:3 (May 2019), pp. 371-3.

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