“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” – Hebrews 2:12

The Unsung Librarian: Ronald Staveley at UCL

This is a personal essay in the form of a clarion call, or, indeed, going back to the Doric Greek, a ‘paean’. Or if you’re not so much into that war stuff, a hymn: to Ronald Staveley, in fact, “[t]eacher, counsellor, committee man, editor and author, commuter over many years from Leigh-on-Sea to Gower Street”.

Although never Head of Department at UCL’s School of Library, Archive and Information Studies (now known simply as the Department of Information Studies or DIS) Staveley reached the position of Director of Library Studies, from his original start in the Department in the aftermath of the Second World War in 1946, finally retiring in 1979.

Perhaps not a researcher in one sense of the word (a sense where important findings are widely disseminated by research papers, for example) my paper nonetheless seeks to make a case for Staveley as, in fact, a research pioneer at UCL, one who sought “[t]o engage in research upon (a subject); to investigate or study closely” and a man who may be seen as exemplifying “the curiosity-driven, cross-disciplinary, pioneering nature of the activity we seek to generate through UCL Research Frontiers.”

I had never heard of Ronald Staveley, until I came across an odd-shaped pamphlet, also rather oddly-titled (for a librarianship publication) “Personal Viewpoints”, produced under the auspices of the “University of London, School of Librarianship and Archives” in a series of “Occasional Publications” of which this work was “Occasional Publications No. 13”. Published in 1964, and apparently long forgotten in the library world, I


3 http://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-frontiers/contest
tracked down a copy in UCL Stores and was profoundly rewarded for my efforts.

My current research in DIS is as a PhD student with a focus on the public library, and with a specific research locus of the underlying philosophies, beliefs and concepts that inform, frame and help make manifest UK public libraries. An essential part of this investigation is understanding and analyzing the different philosophies at play, including the professional philosophies of librarians, and teachers of librarianship themselves, as some of the jigsaw pieces, if you will, in this complex, and interdisciplinary research project, nestling where the borders of Library and Information Studies, Philosophy and Anthropology appear to conjoin.

Certainly it was the title of Staveley’s work that drew to me it at first: could this be a “personal” statement of professional philosophy? What might this text reveal regards one man’s interpretation of UK libraries? What influence might his “personal viewpoints” have had as a text, and what was his influence as a UCL lecturer and member of the department? How relevant to the now of librarianship, fifty-eights years later, might it be? And what was so “personal” about this title anyway, published as it clearly was as part of the School’s formal publications on aspects of libraries and librarianship?

“My involvement with people is matter of fact, but to be productive it has to become self-conscious and a matter of choice as well. I also need to be committed to the cause of reading. This is not possible without experience of the great power that books can exert on readers. This experience is however likely to discourage me, as a librarian, from intruding overmuch between readers and their reading materials. When I can pause and trace my own development, signposted by books, books met casually in ways that I could not have foreseen; when I reflect that the half dozen most important books came at the appropriate times, though this was not clear till later ... I see that timing of meetings with books is all-important ... awareness of the uniqueness of each meeting between reader and reading matter, an awareness that the meeting can be fruitless, fruitful or fateful”.

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I was astonished. Here, I was reading not only something incredibly “personal”, but more than this, an academic text that thrust out the hand of reason, logic and affability as initial reader-greeting, to provide a concise, wonderfully poetic discourse on the nature of libraries and people. I was intrigued. Who was this man who wrote so curiously and imaginatively on his field of knowledge and expertise? A quick trip to my supervisor, Vanda Broughton, revealed his “unassuming” nature, she could not recall, as her time as a student briefly under Staveley, much about him at all, but referred me to some older colleagues who might perhaps be able to “shed some more light on the man.” So it was that I made my way to Norwich, to have a conversation with UCL Emeritus Professors I & J McIlwaine, departmental colleagues of Staveley for many years.

“Ronald went to the school [now known as DIS] after the war … [he] was in Sheffield Public Libraries … He came from Sheffield, he’d been a lather boy, as a boy, or a young man … in a barbershop, the one who actually lathers the chin before … he was in the war, he was in the army in the war … he was always very much convinced of the role of the public library and one of his great sort of theses was that the presence of the public library had saved this country from potential revolution in the 1930s … because of the Depression and so on …. he was obviously working in those days, and he said the public libraries were filled … [people] were able to go and read and people who were out of work could go … he saw it as an outlet for social activity and an opportunity for self-improvement, if people wanted it, which is what he’d done … he did all his qualifications by post or by evening, he got his degree by post, I think he had a degree in philosophy …”

Learning this, it made me think of some of my research findings relating to the concept of “self-culture”, on which Edward Edwards (librarian at the British Museum, whose public library statistics work helped bring about England’s first Public Libraries Act, 1850) writes that “[h]ow farther means and appliances of this self-culture may be usefully provided or increased by the direct intervention of government, and in what manner popular lending

5 Interview with Emeritus Professors I and J McIlwaine. Conducted and recorded in Norwich, April 2012.
libraries might most effectually be brought within the reach of the artisan and agricultural classes, is a topic of deep interest”.

Perhaps Staveley’s work and experiences as a public librarian in Sheffield public libraries, and his personal background – working his way up, making the time and space for his own educational aspirations, his “self-culture” in gaining qualifications and experiences which enabled him to eventually become Director of Library Studies – in some way speaks to his understanding, belief and philosophy of public library service? How, then, did this philosophy, as part of his teaching and syllabus development of librarianship at UCL, disseminate itself?

“Ronald’s teaching must be seen carried to its logical conclusion in many libraries of every kind both in the United Kingdom and overseas, particularly in countries of the Commonwealth. A long succession of students from Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and East and West Africa, to name but a selection, has passed through the school and come under his influence. In the early days many came from Scandinavia also, before these countries had fully organized their own library schools. In the recent past he visited Japan to advise on a programme of education for the libraries of the future” writes Professor I. McIlwaine in the opening salvo of the Festschrift “in Honour of Ronald Staveley” published in 1983.

In fact, then, we are likely to find Staveley’s close investigations, and the products of his research, and findings, his reflection on and exploration of his field, most keenly displayed by means of what he, himself, considered pivotal: “human encounters”.

Emeritus Professors McIlwaine recall how Staveley “was sociable, he always had tea in the afternoon ... those afternoon teas were quite a feature of the school in those days ... he was concerned, nowadays they would call it mentoring, but in those days it was simply encouraging new, young colleagues ... and he was very good at that .... Ronald was the one who was interested in

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everybody ... he liked the one to one, he liked to get people to talk about themselves, and he encouraged people to do things ..."; examples perhaps, of a personal philosophy put into practice, one which sees the “problem of human relationships ... [as] far greater than the adjustment of individuals into an efficient form of society. For each person there is the crucial quest for personal fulfillment, through and with fellow creatures, of whom some will bring pain and discord, and others—or the same at other times—unique satisfactions and happiness.” To this purpose, and perhaps with a sense of “personal fulfillment” for Staveley, I think it is possible to see his “human curiosity” and theories for practical education in librarianship in full flow, and this is certainly a place where “results do not necessarily have any immediate application”, dealing as we are with the personal dynamics of humans.

The large number of personal responses to the 2011-12 Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s inquiry into public library closures certainly vivifies Staveley’s professional vision of dynamic intimate occurrences: of a personal, individual, human encounter during the public library experience, nowadays more likely in a space where “conversations among readers ... consulting the internet, reading newspapers, eliciting information from the librarians about where to go for help with different problems, doing homework” are common features.

Staveley, writing in the mid 1950s, notes that “[I]ibrarianship will more readily achieve the best internal organization ... when its members habitually see their problems in the widest social setting. The immense social problem of the present is the compelling need for men to speak to each other without hindrance. We are learning, the hard way, that the world’s economic and spiritual welfare is altogether dependent on intercommunication.” This notion certainly matches aspects of philosophies espoused by original public library legislators and founders, and might not go amiss as a point of

8 Interview with Emeritus Professors I and J McIlwaine. Conducted and recorded in Norwich, April 2012.
10 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-frontiers>
11 Written evidence submitted by the Save Friern Barnet Library Group to the 2012 Select Committee <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcumeds/writev/library/lib085.htm>
reflection in current times, but what might such thoughts mean for students of librarianship coming to study under Staveley and his syllabus during his tenure in the well-known UCL department, originally founded in 1919 as the UK’s first every library school?

“...I think he [Staveley] started as a book boy and did his exams while he was there [Sheffield Public Library] ... I think he had an urge to improve library education probably, and he saw the benefits of a full-time library course for students ... he started the course, ‘The Study of Reading’ ... in the early seventies ... he was giving lectures, and then decided there was enough for a course ... the students would say “What is the study of reading?” and Ronald would say “Anything. It can be the influence of reading on what one writes, or the influence of someone on someone else” ... it was very much his idea, and then that led on to reading as bibliotherapy ... he thought that librarians should be aware of why people wanted to read, and why libraries – it was user-based ... not just what you want, but what should you want? ... He had driven his own path of study, not had anyone really guiding him, so he learnt by experience [how important this was].”

Staveley’s influence on the Department during this time is clear, both Emeritus Professors McIlwaine concur that “Ronald was quietly in the background and kept tabs on everyone ... he was the one who was behind the running of the place ... behind syllabus development”,14 and he was also active in (what was then called) BAILER – the committee of Heads of Schools.

Peter G. New, writing in the Festschrift describes how “[f]rom the beginning of my teaching career in 1959 I was conscious of the influence of Ronald Staveley on education for librarianship. He was of course known to me as a leader in the field of subject bibliography...”15 while the Professors’ McIlwaine recall how “… in the library education world he was a big light ... people came to him ... our colleagues in other library schools, he was very well regarded, the guru of library education ... Ronald’s activities in the group of

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13 Interview with Emeritus Professors I and J McIlwaine. Conducted and recorded in Norwich, April 2012.
14 Interview with Emeritus Professors I and J McIlwaine. Conducted and recorded in Norwich, April 2012.
library educators ... he was able to bring everyone together and try and get them to agree on a common core: with the student as the focus, which was always Ronald’s great emphasis ... he structured the course, the syllabus [at UCL DIS], he organised the day to day running, he was the one who had a vision of the department, he had the student at heart, rather than the research grant at heart, or the college.”  

This attentiveness to the student, to the individual reader, to, in fact, the individual – the personal – seems not only a mark of Staveley’s professional demeanour, outlook and most of all practice, as a library educator, but also manifests as a distinct facet of his research insights, in particular the area of libraries, librarians and the reading experience: “these multiple mysterious meetings between readers and texts.”  

Staveley’s interest in “readability formulae and the whole matter of reading studies led him to evolve the second of two innovative courses that he was responsible for developing in the library school programme. The Study of Reading is a course that is very much Ronald’s own...” notes Professor I. McIlwaine in the slim Festschrift (1983), published just after his retirement from the department.

Staveley writes that “[c]rucial” in the “communication process” that is librarianship, “is the personal encounter in the library between the reader in need of assistance and the librarian or assistant”, these “human encounters”, which remain personal, and which he goes on to note “[f]or my part, I think I would name as my first and most important requirement a conviction of the importance of people, arising from a reasonably hopeful philosophy or religious assurance. I believe I cannot understand how much help I can give or get, until I have fully accepted the logic of the human situation, the literal inter-relatedness and inter-dependence of people.” What, perhaps, Staveley is also nodding towards, and which he enunciates elsewhere, is that sometimes “knowledge about things deny us the experience of knowing things. To know things in this way we have to let them speak to us. This is

16 Interview with Emeritus Professors I and J McIlwaine. Conducted and recorded in Norwich, April 2012.
knowledge by revelation”, and what he sees as a part of personal, human encounters which ultimately make up an individual life, where “[l]iving is experience, reflecting about living is remembering and classifying experience.”  

This leads me to reflect upon Staveley’s clear commitment to “the encouragement of studies which ignore the exclusiveness of those divisive terms, the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities”, which is firmly apparent in the two short essays, ‘On Libraries and People’ and ‘On Subjects’, which complete the eighteen page “Personal Viewpoints” pamphlet.

Perusing the other works of Ronald Staveley in more detail, with the useful help of a bibliography in “Bibliography and Reading: A Festschrift in Honour of Ronald Staveley”, this uniquely personal and poetic voice reappears in brief interludes: often slipped in via introductions or prefatory and opening chapters, such as that of “Introduction to Subject Study”.

“Briefly stated, the problems raised for us in life, through our continually changing environment and personal circumstances, have to do with ends and means and valuations. We adjust and re-adjust ourselves in relation to these problems, partly as a result of our own empirical experience of trial, error and success, partly through the life-long education we receive through the communications media that enable us to speak with our contemporaries and learn from our predecessors. We ponder basic questions in science from the moment when we are conscious of self and not-self, of motion, seasons, sequences and stars. We are continually seeking techniques and tools, to make life safer, longer and more pleasant. We wonder about beauty and ugliness, and about things which seem rewarding when others seems quite the opposite. Not least, we wonder why we are here at all, we puzzle about what we should be spending our time on, about responsibility to and for our fellows, about how to live successfully with them while still doing the things that please us, and about what

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the future has in store for them and us. In short, we have in us something of the scientist, the artist and the religious.”

This trinity of thought is perhaps what attracts, excites and interests me about Staveley’s work, and is no doubt something also to do with how I think and feel about libraries and librarianship, people and life, myself: as the reader of his text and what I bring to it. Fundamentally, however, really I get the clear sense that these points are what Ronald Staveley brings to libraries and librarianship itself, that is, a sense of poetry, wonder, and … perhaps, something along the lines of how and what I think and feel about, bring and give to, poetry and libraries, and people per se: a deep and intimate commitment to (exploring) humanity.

When discussing Staveley’s influences Professors McIlwaine note the pull of poetry, “Emily Dickinson, he was very keen on, Edward Carpenter, and the Spanish Mystics, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross … Ronald was always impressed by Carpenter, he would very often bring up a Carpenter quotation or “as Carpenter would have said” … he was interested in religion but he wasn’t a churchman in any sense … he was certainly interested in spirituality …” perhaps mostly therefore, in the Coleridge sense, where “The Will is pre-eminently the spiritual Constituent in our Being.”

The IFLA/UNESCO Public Library manifesto, revised and re-published in 1994, “proclaims UNESCO’s belief in the public library as a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women”, highlighting these such immaterial values, which a commitment to public libraries brings to individuals, and communities, worldwide. “[C]ommunity, writes Staveley, on the final page of his “Personal Viewpoints” “denote[s] a positively-related and mutually responsive group of persons. The growth of community can thus be said to be the pre-requisite for human happiness”

23 Interview with Emeritus Professors I and J McIlwaine. Conducted and recorded in Norwich, April 2012.
while “the subject of history ... can of course be seen as human beings adapting themselves to their environment. If a historian maintains this view strictly, he is just another scientist studying social organisms. There have been many political thinkers willing to argue thus. We, with our present viewpoint, can not agree. We see human history with our attention less restricted. We see persons in dynamic relationships, achieving things, making mistakes, reflecting, deciding and consummating thought and decision in purposive action. We see creation and also destruction, not simple animal adaptation. We say that all this is involved in history. Organic development, yes; but personal action too.”

This, to my mind, is in fact an apt description of a pioneering researcher, someone experiencing “dynamic relationships, achieving things, making mistakes, reflecting, deciding and consummating thought and decision in purposive action”, at once an individual, and a person in communion with a congregation of fellow scholars. I hereby lift up my voice, and sing through these silent pages, in praise of Ronald Staveley, librarian and teacher, imaginative and curious fellow human.

Sara Wingate Gray,
PhD student, Department of Information Studies, UCL