

THE DOUGLAS LIBRARY: FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO 1964

by Hilary Richardson (originally published in 1996)

As renovations are being completed in the Douglas Library, and the time for its reopening is approaching, I thought it would be interesting to turn back the clock and remember what the Douglas Library was like in the "old days", that is, even before the north addition and renovations of 1965/66 first dramatically altered its landscape. So I offer this combination of Douglas Library history and my own personal reminiscences of the early 1960s.

It was to be eighty-four years before the Queen's University Library had its own building, and its first forty years had been particularly peripatetic. The library began its existence with an initial donation by James Mitchell on 25 July 1840 of seven boxes of books, including philosophical and theological works, and some classics, Greek and Latin. These plus other donated material were first stored in the tower of St. Andrew's Church. In the summer of 1842, the collection, by now numbering 1500 volumes, was moved across the street to the attics of the Princess Street houses, which Queen's was then renting. In 1853, when Queen's, and its library, moved into Summerhill, the first catalogue was compiled, listing about 2600 volumes, many of them theological works. This grew to 7417 volumes in 1867, and 11,000 in 1877, by which time the library had moved again, this time to the Old Medical Building, right behind Summerhill. In 1880, space was provided for the library in the rounded west end of the Old Arts Building (now called Theological Hall), which opened in October of that year.

The first full-time librarian for the Queen's University Library was a remarkable woman named Miss Lois Saunders, also a linguist, literary critic, poet and translator. She took over the position in 1899 from Dr. Adam Shortt, the first professor of Political and Economic Science at Queen's, who had collected much rare and valuable Canadiana for the library. It fell to Miss Saunders to cope with increasing numbers of books and borrowers, in an increasingly cramped space. Tributes from alumni of this era attest to her success in this endeavour. Although her annual book budget seldom exceeded \$2000, the collection grew rapidly during the 23 years of her tenure as Chief Librarian, mostly due to the wisdom and discretion with which she made book purchases. Early in 1915 English professor (later Vice-Principal) W.E. McNeill had advocated adoption of the Dewey Decimal system, but it was Miss Saunders who, after soliciting opinions from several North American chief cataloguers, made the decision later the same year to use the Library of Congress classification system for Queen's library books.

1915 was also significant for the library because in this year a new Chancellor was elected at Queen's, whose portrait now hangs in the Special Collections room at Stauffer Library. Dr. James Douglas was a Queen's graduate and ordained Presbyterian minister, who had later gone into scientific work and made a fortune in the copper mining industry in the United States. At the time of the new Chancellor's investiture, the Queen's University Library still had no proper building to itself, and the Principal's Report of

1914/15 had mentioned its "congested condition". By the following year, Dr. Douglas, whose total benefactions to the university amounted to well over half a million dollars, had donated \$100,000 (later increased to \$150,000) "for the erection and equipment of a new library".

Although the site had been chosen, and work was "to begin as soon as the ground permits", it was later decided to postpone building until after the war. Postwar shortages led to further delays, and it was not until after a capital grant of \$150,000 from the Ontario Government that construction was begun in 1922. James Douglas had died by this time, and it was his son Walter who laid the cornerstone of the Douglas Library on May 9, 1923. In the summer of 1924, a collection of 85,000 volumes was finally moved from an extremely overcrowded space in the Old Arts Building to its new home in the two-storey stacks (the location of Douglas Library Storage books just before the move to Stauffer in 1994), and 3,000 reference works were shelved around the third floor Reading Room. The new library was in use almost immediately, but the official and ceremonial opening was held on October 17, 1924.

The central architectural feature of the Collegiate Gothic design of the 1924 Douglas Library was a two-storey Memorial Hall or chapel with arched stone ceiling, stained glass windows, and large bronze plaque commemorating those with Queen's connections who had died in World War I (a second plaque was added after World War II). It is this distinctive feature that I chiefly remember about the Douglas Library when I started as a Queen's student in the 1960s. However, when the addition was put on the north side in 1965, it was decided that the Memorial Hall made it impossible to produce a workable floor plan for the technical services division on the first floor, or to provide adequate space for the proposed combined Archives and Canadiana sections on the second floor. So the Hall was removed. I had often wondered what became of the stained glass windows and the bronze plaques, but came across them recently in the Memorial Room of the Students Memorial Union, as it was called before the John Deutsch Centre was appended to the building in the mid-1970s.

1924 was the first year that departments were set up within the Library, and by 1927 the staff, not including student assistants and stenographers, consisted of nine individuals: four in Cataloguing, two in Circulation, one in Reference, one Order Librarian, and one Chief Librarian, Mr. Nathan van Patten, who had succeeded Miss Saunders, and had supervised the transfer into the Douglas Building. At this time the Douglas Library contained 150,000 volumes, of which about 25,000 volumes circulated annually (not including pickups of course), and was open for 78 hours a week.

The summer of 1964 marked the fortieth year since the opening of the Douglas Library, which by now employed over 60 people. It contained about 450,000 volumes, had had a circulation of 112,372 in the previous academic year, and was now open during term 102.5 hours a week for graduates (96 hours for undergraduates). This was the last summer of the original building, before the major changes caused by the additions and renovations of 1965/66. It was also my first summer of work as a student assistant in the Douglas Library.

In those days I did most of my studying in the third floor Reading Room, which with its arched ceiling, its high mullioned windows, and its dark oak woodwork, was in my opinion the most beautiful room in the library. Unlike most areas of the original building, this room, except for the elimination of the north side stained glass windows with the addition of the north wing Reading Room, has changed very little over the years, even after the recent 1994/96 renovations.

The denizen of this room and the combined Reference/Reserve collection that it housed was a stooped white-haired lady called Miss Melva Eagleson, small in stature but formidable in demeanour. It was difficult to understand her when she spoke, but you were in absolutely no doubt as to what she meant if she came over, wagged a very arthritic finger at you, and admonished you to obey the large "QUIET" signs posted throughout. Some of us nicknamed her "the dragon lady", and almost every student was somewhat intimidated by her, if not actually terrified of her.

I've no idea why, one April day in 1964, I summoned up all my courage and made the borderline suicidal gesture of asking Miss Eagleson, of all people, for a summer job. I think I must have been suffering from temporary insanity, cooped up there in the Reading Room, writing essays and preparing for exams. Perhaps it was just before a final exam, when I was convinced that I was already doomed.

Seeming astonished by my request, she stared at me for what seemed like an interminable length of time. Finally she replied in a stern voice, "If you want a job in the library, you'll have to speak to the Chief Librarian!"

Encouraged by her not having given me an immediate no, I descended two flights of the central staircase (which survived the renovations but was no longer central), then headed west, past the Card Catalogue on my left and the Circulation Desk on my right, and through the Memorial Hall until I came to the Chief Librarian's office, across from Archives and just inside the main entrance (by the main entrance I mean the long-disused south wing entrance, off University Avenue).

The prospect of speaking to the Chief Librarian, Mr. H. P. Gundy, former professor of English, author of several books, and later to be editor of the Queen's Quarterly, was not as daunting as you might think. Although I was much in awe of him, I also knew that Mr. Gundy was a gentleman of great wit and warmth, universally liked and respected by both staff and patrons. Unfortunately I have very few memories of my job interview, except that for some reason I was not at all nervous as I sat in a comfortable chair in Mr. Gundy's book-lined office, and was asked why I wanted to work in the library (I wish I could remember my reply, as it seemed to be the right one). The only other thing I remember was, strangely enough, a discussion of theatrical productions in which we had been involved, as we both had thespian inclinations at the time. The upshot of the interview was that I had a job, starting the first Monday after exams, working for Miss Eagleson. I would be paid \$1 an hour.

My first day as an employee of the Douglas Library was very nearly my last. I went to work that morning eager to prove myself to the redoubtable Miss Eagleson. The first task she assigned me was to cut out articles from newspapers for a vertical file she was keeping. As I was nearing completion of my careful cutting job, one of my fellow workers mentioned that Miss Eagleson insisted on having a half-inch margin around each article. My heart sank. I had strained to listen to her instructions, but either I had missed something, or she had assumed I would have the brains to figure out that I should leave a margin. There was absolutely nothing that I could do at this point, and I took the articles to her, laboriously cut on the lines with no margin at all. This was not an auspicious beginning, and I was convinced that my brief career at the Douglas Library was over.

I was in for a surprise. After listening to my profuse and abject apologies, she just laughed at me, and then gave me another assignment. I breathed a sigh of relief, now certain I could survive anything at the Douglas Library.

As I got to know her better, I began to appreciate Miss Eagleson. She did in fact have a good sense of humour, in spite of the fierce image she projected. A good conversationalist once one could understand her manner of speaking, she was intensely interested in women's issues, and current political events, especially Canadian. Three years later, in 1967, she would be the recipient of a Canada Medal in recognition of her contribution to Canadian culture.

Miss Eagleson and I also shared an interest in history. She had come to the Douglas Library in 1928, the same year as Mr. E.C. Kyte, the Chief Librarian for 19 years who had followed Mr. van Patten and preceded Mr. Gundy (who was also to hold the post for 19 years), and she had many stories about "the old days".

Although largely self-educated, Mr. Kyte was a writer with a considerable scholarly reputation, as well as a librarian with a keen interest in public service. He had worked continuously in libraries since the age of 18, when he had obtained an assistantship at the Marylebone Free Library in London, England. By 1919 he had been appointed Secretary to the Library Association, the professional body of librarians in Great Britain. Mr. Kyte's most recent position before becoming Chief Librarian at Queen's (he was the only applicant for the job from a distance of greater than 50 miles from Kingston) had been as Librarian of the King's Library at Sandringham. Here he had rearranged and catalogued the private library of King George V, and had been a member of the Royal Household for over a year. Miss Eagleson thought that this might have accounted for his insistence that Douglas Library books always be neat and tidy, and arranged in "a soldierly fashion". He did not seem to concern himself about the layers of dust accumulating on the books, just as long as they were standing up very straight on the shelf!

For a large part of Miss Eagleson's career, the third floor Reading Room was the central hub of Douglas Library activity, as it not only housed Reference and Reserve, but also served as Periodicals Room and Circulation Desk. This was because for the first thirty years of its existence, the Douglas Building was shared by both Administration and

Library staff. The former occupied most of the first and second floors of the building, excluding stacks, and had only vacated it in 1954, after Richardson Hall was built.

There was an additional source of crowding in the Reading Room area for its first eight years, because the Medical Library, or such portion of it as had survived the disastrous fire in the Old Medical Building in August of 1924, was also housed on the third floor of the Douglas, in the northeast corner room that afterwards became the Graduate Study, and later was converted into offices for Reserve staff. The Medical Library was relocated to the Old Arts Building (Theological Hall) in 1932, where it stayed, except for the years 1953 to 1966 when it was housed in Summerhill, until the move to Botterell Hall in 1978. It consisted of about 29,500 volumes when it was renamed the Health Sciences Library in 1967, a year after its move back to the west wing of the Theological Hall, in the area now occupied by the Rotunda Theatre. Here, until 1978, it would undergo the same kind of growing pains as had been experienced in the same space by the main library some fifty years earlier.

To my regret, my work in the Reading Room with Miss Eagleson, whom I never called "the dragon lady" again, did not last long. After I had been there about two months, I was seconded from the top of the building to the bottom, where there had been some kind of crisis in the Mail Room. It was there that I was to work until classes resumed in September, but, as this article has gone on longer than I anticipated, my further adventures in this last summer of the old Douglas Library will have to wait until the next issue of Shelf Life.

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