
Reflections: An Interview with F. W. Lancaster

LEIGH S. ESTABROOK AND F. W. LANCASTER

ABSTRACT

This article is an interview with F. W. Lancaster that explores his recollections of his life and career, including his accomplishments and the individuals who had significant influence on him.

INTRODUCTION

In 1986 I became dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, thrilled at the number of distinguished faculty members, but terrified the school was so small. About a year later, Professor F. W. Lancaster (Wilf) told me he had an excellent job offer from Texas—one that would, as I recall, increase his salary by more than 50 percent. When he left my office, I picked up the telephone to the Provost and said, “We are going to lose Professor Lancaster—it will be a tragedy for the School—you have to help.” Then I promptly broke down in tears. Probably not a good thing for deans to do, but the university, too, recognized how important he was not only to GSLIS, but to the wider community, and they matched the Texas salary offer and later recognized him with the prestigious University Scholar award.

Wilf’s contributions to his students and to the field have been numerous. In recent years one of the greatest was his editorship of *Library Trends*. The journal has reflected his deep understanding both of the breadth and dynamic changes in this field, and he recruited some of its best scholars as contributors. It is fitting that this issue provides a tribute to him.

On November 27, 2007, I had the good fortune to interview Wilf about his life and career. This transcript of the conversation has been minimally edited. (LSE)

THE INTERVIEW

LSE: Wilf, tell me how you became a librarian.

FWL: Well, actually it was one of those stupid things. You think that being a librarian has something to do with reading books because as a teenager and a pre-teenager I was an avid reader so I thought being an avid reader means you should work in a bookstore or a library. The local public library had a vacancy and I applied and got this job as a library assistant in England, in Newcastle. It went from there.

LSE: What were you reading? What did you love to read?

FWL: Oh, I read all kinds of literature. I read Robert Louis Stevenson and John Buchan and Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens.

LSE: So you became a librarian. . . .

FWL: Well I got a job as a library assistant which was kind of. . . . There's no real equivalent in this country because you do menial things like shelving books and things, but you also come into contact with the public and check books out and eventually help on the [more professional tasks]. We had a readers' advisory desk. You got good experience. Then I started studying. I started going to library school part time and then for a year full time and then more part time. I took national examinations so that's basically what happened.

LSE: What can you say about the people who influenced you? You talk about books, but what about the people?

FWL: Well there were two influences. One was family influence. The other was professional influence. The big family influence was my eldest sister, Alma, who was the most educated member of the family, and she was at one time head mistress of the school I was going to. She caned me actually on occasion. I'm sure I didn't deserve it. She encouraged me to . . . I don't know how to put it . . . to study certainly and to work at developing a profession. So she had a big influence in terms of my early life.

LSE: Before you leave that, what about your parents? What kind of work did they do? How many kids in your family?

*FWL: Well, there were three girls and I was the last one—much, much later. In fact, at least one of my sisters was married before I was born. All my sisters were much older than I was. My father . . . My mother never worked outside the home. My father was first of all a coal miner. Then when he was invalided out of the mines with *pneumoconiosis*, he worked in an aluminum factory.*

LSE: That's not much better is it?

FWL: Well, it was actually a lot safer than being down in the mine.

LSE: So you credit Alma and who else?

FWL: Then of course there were some major professional influences. That could lead perhaps to another question, but the day I began work in the public library, Newcastle Public Library, in England, a man called Frank Rodgers also began. He subsequently became the librarian at I think the University of Miami. He started on the same day I did and for a variety of reasons he came to the United States and got a job at the Akron Public Library. Some years later when I was twenty-five, twenty-six and kind of footloose in England, not knowing quite what to do with myself, he

persuaded me to come to the States. In essence it was a whole strange series of events because he moved from Akron Public Library to the University of Illinois Reference Department and I essentially went and took his job at the Akron Public Library. In those days there was a serious shortage of qualified librarians and American employers were recruiting in England. So I got this job at the Akron Public Library and I stayed there for a couple of years. So that was a big influence.

The next big influence was when I came to this country I never really intended to stay forever. It was a temporary thing, an experiment. When I got a chance to go back to England I got a chance to go and work on the ASLIB/Cranfield Project for Cyril Cleverdon, which was really a fantastic experience. That was a fantastic opportunity because it got me out of librarianship per se and into what was essentially a new field: information sciences, information retrieval. So Cleverdon was a big influence.

LSE: How did you get to work on the ASLIB Project?

FWL: It was an ad. The ASLIB Cranfield Project advertised, I don't remember where, maybe it was the Times Literary Supplement or something. They needed a research assistant. It happened . . . I had done some relatively pioneering work because after I left the Akron Public Library I went to work for the Babcock and Wilcox Company as a technical librarian and I had done some work in information retrieval, setting up an SDI service and so on and so forth. That was novel in those days. We're talking about the early '60s, and so I applied for this position at the ASLIB/Cranfield Project, and soon Cleverdon arranged to have me interviewed by someone at the National Science Foundation who was funding the project. So I got the position without knowing Cyril directly.

After I had worked on the project for a while I realized that I really didn't want to remain in England, and so the next person who had a tremendous influence on my life was Saul Herner because he brought me back to work in Washington, DC, in a consulting company. That gave me very good experience because I worked on all kinds of contracts and so on and so forth with federal agencies. Then that led naturally to being offered a position with the National Library of Medicine. So Cyril took me back to England. Saul brought me back to the United States, which led to the National Library of Medicine and the MEDLARS Evaluation Project, which really made my name and led fairly quickly to my first book.

As a result of the publication of the first book, I was approached by at least two universities, in terms of potential faculty positions, and Herb Goldhor persuaded me to come to Illinois. He was the third big professional influence in my life. After I came here and met the faculty there was no doubt this was the place I wanted to come. He encouraged me and all the time that he was director of the school he supported and encouraged me. He was a big influence on my professional development.

The big event obviously was Frank Rodgers originally bringing me to this country. The others were opportunities. I mean the fact that the National Library of Medicine wanted an evaluation done of MEDLARS. There was no one in the United States at that time with any real experience in evaluation of information systems other than myself, so I fell right into it. I wasn't even a U.S. citizen at that

time. So the National Library of Medicine had to justify the fact that they were giving this position to a noncitizen because no one else was qualified to do it. So that was a big event.

LSE: Do you think it was your intellectual curiosity in trying to figure out how well things were going? What led you to do all this evaluation? Was this in your soul early on when you were an assistant librarian?

FWL: No I don't think so. I think it was more good luck than anything else. I mean, the Cranfield Project came along . . .

LSE: But you raised the questions. You're the one who raised these questions.

FWL: I mean . . . I thought that doing some kind of research having to do with indexing and related things, abstracting that kind of thing, would be challenging I guess. That's how it came about.

LSE: What are the things you have accomplished of which you are most proud?

FWL: Well, I think what I'm most proud of I suppose is recognition. I got seven awards from the American Society of Information Science and Technology, which is many more than anybody else ever got, four best book awards, best Information Science Book Awards, one best Information Science Paper Award. I was the first recipient of the outstanding Information Science Teacher Award. I got the Award of Merit. I mean, what more can you do as far as national recognition goes? Also two of my books received awards from the American Library Association. Then there's the University Scholar Award, which is not to be sniffed at. So I'm most proud of the recognition I received over thirty active years or so.

LSE: Do you see your body of work as a whole?

FWL: I get a lot of satisfaction out of being able to present material in a very simple way. I enjoy writing. When I was in library school way back in England years and years ago, in those days one element of what we studied in library school was English literature. I had an English literature professor who was great who told me I had a gift for writing. So I enjoyed writing and I enjoyed taking things that . . . how should I put it . . . some authors present in an unnecessarily complex way and trying to reduce them into something anybody could understand. This is, I think, quite satisfying. Of course it's also satisfying in teaching also.

LSE: When you encountered the critics along the way, how has the criticism affected your thinking and perceptions of the problems that you're addressing?

FWL: I don't think the critics have had too much effect on me to be perfectly honest. I don't get aggrieved if I get bad reviews or something like that. It doesn't really upset me. No, I don't think I've been upset by critics. In general I've had decent reviews.

LSE: Are there people with whom you've sparred or debated who have affected your way of thinking of the problems you're addressing? Maybe not even public critics but people with whom you've engaged in debate.

FWL: I can't think of anybody. I honestly can't think of anybody who's really had that kind of influence on me.

LSE: Many students, especially international students, credit you as one of the main reasons for coming to the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Illinois. And you have done extensive international travel. What can you say about the impact of this international exchange on your teaching and writing?

FWL: When I was an active faculty member I was always anxious to get foreign students as advisees, especially at the doctoral level, because in many cases I had visited or even lived in the country they came from, certainly in the case of Brazil or later in India. So I thought it was a good . . . I had a good understanding comparatively of where they were coming from so I could probably help them. I probably had more patience with people whose written English was less than perfect than the typical faculty member. So I think that I particularly enjoyed my foreign students and also the fact that I had so many foreign contacts and lived professionally in so many different countries actually: Scandinavia, Brazil, India, Spain, Israel. It made me think of myself as an internationalist rather than an American. I don't feel a strong national bond with any country. I've lived in Israel. I've done work for the Arab League. I just don't feel particularly patriotic as an American or as a Brit or anything of that nature.

LSE: You just talked about your patience with your international students and their writing. Do you think having a large family has contributed to the patience?

FWL: I think the patience with the family came later. When I was at my most active and had a lot of stress because I was flying here and there giving papers and working on research projects and directing theses and this, that and the other, I had much less patience domestically. As I began to get rid of some of these activities and stresses then I became . . . I'm much more patient now than I was as a young father. No doubt about that.

LSE: But certainly you have remained highly productive.

FWL: I wouldn't say highly productive. I grabbed interesting opportunities. After I retired I did go to teach in Israel for six months and things like that. I revised my indexing and abstracting book because I thought it was the best one available. I didn't want it supplanted by others that I thought were inferior. Of course I continued for a number of years as editor of Library Trends, so I had to keep up to a large extent with what was happening in the field. You have to come up with new topics and so on and so forth. Obviously I haven't been as active since I retired as I was before, but I mean it hasn't completely gone away, although I'm really not doing anything professional right now.

LSE: Are there areas you look back on and say, "I wish I had done more in this particular area. If only there'd been time."

FWL: Well, actually, some years ago . . . I can't remember, seven or eight . . . maybe longer ago than that, I gave some Ranganathan lectures in Bangalore on using bibliometrics to assess research productivity. It came out as a little publication and I kind of regret that I never developed that into a textbook on bibliometrics for library school students because the core was there and I think bibliometrics is a good

example of a field that can be explicated in many cases simply without pages and pages of mathematics.

LSE: Do you think it's partly because it could be pictured?

FWL: *Yes, I think that's part of it. The doctoral theses that I directed that I'm most proud of were all in the area of bibliometrics. I think it was an excellent thesis by Jaime Pontigo in Mexico on the Bradford Distribution, and Szarina Abdullah who was looking at popular science bibliometrically, and Ray Stinson compared two measures of obsolescence. I think all of those . . . I kind of regret I never got down and put it together into a book.*

LSE: What do you think the most important issues are the profession needs to address for the future?

FWL: *Well, I'm not sure. I mean, there is an issue but whether or not it can be addressed or not or whether it should be addressed is another matter. I decry the depersonalization of society. I think technology has had important benefits but also I deplore the fact that . . . I never use ATM machines. I don't like telephone answering machines. I don't use a computer. I write. There is a very good reason for that and that is my vision is not good enough to see the screen. I even have trouble with the keyboard visually. But I never did use even a typewriter. I wrote in long hand.*

It's quite obvious that libraries are becoming depersonalized too. Not so much I think the public libraries but the academic libraries and the fact that it is harder and harder to actually meet a professional person in a library because they are all doing more important things like sitting on committees and worrying about budgets and technology and that kind of thing. I think that's a bad thing. Derek de Solla Price gave a paper here in Illinois at my invitation at a data processing clinic which he called Happiness Is a Warm Librarian. I think the point he was making is very much the way I feel right now. People are important. I think sometimes we overlook the people when we concentrate on the equipment, the technology. Many, many years ago the American Library Association published a book called Patrons Are People, which was about the library patron. You don't get books like that anymore because people have forgotten about the patron. Most of the books that are published by the American Library Association or the British equivalent today are books having to do with technology, not about people. I think that's a bad thing. So I'd like to see the human element of reader assistance not get overlooked.

LSE: Would you be willing to share one or two things people would be surprised to know about you?

FWL: *I would be willing to share quite a few things people probably don't know about me.*

I have two consuming passions. One is doing cryptic crosswords and the other one is European soccer. I spend a fair amount of time doing crossword puzzles and I would very much like to get a contract compiling cryptic crosswords for some magazine. I haven't been able to find a magazine willing to take me on yet. I tried to interest people like the New Yorker or even the weekly insert in the News Gazette to publish a cryptic crossword, but I haven't been able to convince them it would be a good thing. That's one of my passions.

The other one is soccer. When I was a young man I was a strong supporter of an English soccer team from Newcastle. That's when I worked in Newcastle. I used to go every time they played at home. I used to go to all of their matches. I was the big soccer fan. When I came to the United States in 1959 there wasn't much opportunity to really even keep up with what was happening with British soccer. Now, however, through satellite I can actually watch almost all of their matches. The ones I can't watch on satellite I can listen to on audio commentary, radio commentary from England, on the Internet. I spend quite a lot of time watching soccer, not just the team I've always supported but soccer in general. Every Saturday during the soccer season I pretty much watch four or five different matches on television and my family recognizes the fact they can't expect anything from me on a Saturday.

LSE: How do you feel about England being eliminated from Europe 2008?

FWL: It really doesn't bother me. I was never all that incredibly supportive of the national team. I tend to favor underdogs anyway. I was delighted when Greece won the European championship a couple of years ago. England didn't play well so they deserved to lose.

Of course the other thing, apart from those things, is probably not many people know that I have a substantial family and it is growing. I have four biological children, two adopted daughters from India, twelve grandchildren. The first daughter from India we brought here fifteen years ago. Four years ago we brought her biological sister back with us. I tell people that every time I go to India I get pregnant.

LSE: Is there any place you've not been that you'd like to go or you'd like to be?

FWL: No places I haven't been that I'd like to go to professionally, but one place I always wanted to go to but never really made it to, which I'd certainly like to go to vacation-wise, is Greece.

LSE: With your eyesight, do you read much these days? Are you able to read?

FWL: I do read. I tend to take my glasses off and read close because it's easier. I can still read.

LSE: What do you like to read?

FWL: Actually I don't have time to read any more than magazines. If I have time I read the New Yorker and Newsweek and occasionally I read Money Magazine and Budget Travel, but I spend a fair amount of time helping my Indian daughters with their homework.

LSE: Thank you, Wilf.

Leigh S. Estabrook is professor and dean emerita, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where she continues to teach the LEEP introductory course. Former director of the Library Research Center, she is completing a large Institute of Museum and Library Services funded research project on the way citizens use libraries and community technology centers for government information. Dr. Estabrook is a frequent consultant to libraries on evaluation and management and frequently collaborates internationally with universities seeking to improve library and information science education.