

Wilfred John Plumbe, F.L.A.

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Introduction

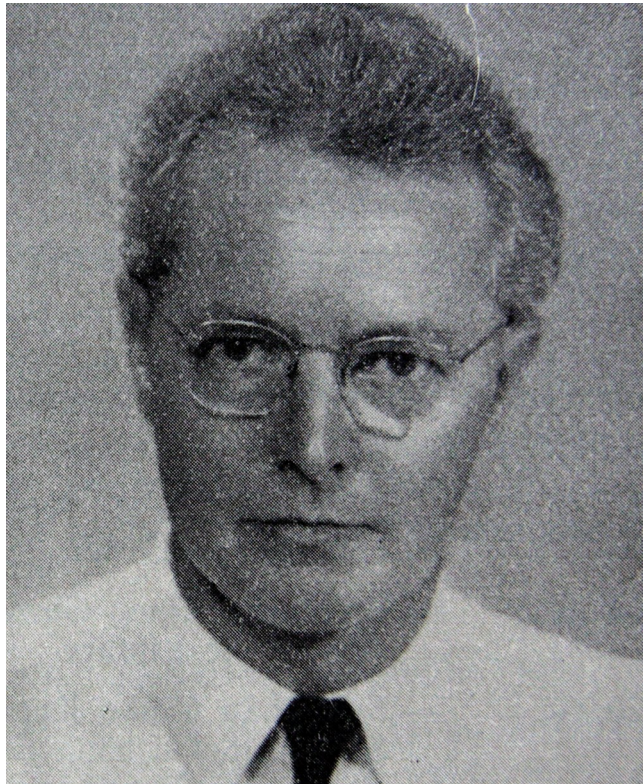
The University of Malaya has its roots in Singapore since 1948. The rapid growth of the University then, resulted in the setting up of two autonomous divisions in 1959; one located in Singapore and the other in Kuala Lumpur. On 1st January 1962, the two divisions became separate universities - the National University of Singapore and the University of Malaya. Mr. Wilfred John Plumbe came to Singapore in March 1953 at a time when the reorganization of the University Library was in its earliest stages. He stayed on for three years before he left Singapore to take up his new appointment as Librarian of the Research Division of the Sudan Government Ministry of Agriculture. During the three years, he made important contributions especially in the field of Malayan bibliography. He was the editor for the journal *Singapore Artist* and was also well remembered for his contributions to the Singapore Arts Society.

In 1959, when the University of Malaya (Kuala Lumpur Division) was set up, Mr Wilfred John Plumbe was given the honor of becoming the first Chief Librarian. At that time, the Kuala Lumpur Division Library operated as a branch of the University Library in Singapore. Books were ordered and catalogued by the Singapore Division Library for the Department of Engineering, Geology, Malay Studies and Indian Studies located at the Kuala Lumpur Division.

Contributions

One of the first few things undertaken by Plumbe when he assumed duty as Chief Librarian, was to become detached from the Singapore Division. He relentlessly pursued to order and catalogue independently. He adopted the Bliss Bibliographic Classification which was quite popular during that time and suited the needs of the Library. He ventured into the use of modern stripdex panels in cataloguing. He ordered books from firms which would give 10% discount and bills paid by British Crown agents thus reducing work both for the Library and the Bursar. The acquisition accelerated to 25,000 volumes per year.

The use of a single sequence of accession numbers for all books in stock was mooted during his time. The Browne system of loans was introduced. As the library expanded, he converted small rooms which had been planned as reference rooms into library staff offices. From a staff of eleven in 1959, it grew to a total of 45



staff; a Chief Librarian, five Assistant Librarians, nine graduate Library Assistants, three stenographers, 14 clerical staff, four typists and nine library attendants.

Wilfred John Plumbe strived to acquire copies of all Malay and Minangkabau language materials from Leiden University, where one of the major collections exists. He also proceeded to acquire Malay language materials on microfilm that can be traced anywhere in the world such as the Sumatra Factory Records, Java Factory Records, Straits Settlements and Original Correspondence (1838-1910). Apparatus to read and print microfilms such as the Thermo-Fax microfilm reader-printer were also purchased. Materials on other scripts such as Tamil, Jawi, Roman, Arabic, Cyrillic, Sanskrit and Mandarin and typewriters with Jawi and Tamil keyboards for the processing of the books in these languages were acquired.

The oldest university of the country developed the largest academic library in the country under his leadership. He stayed for four years from 1959 to 1962, after which he left for Nigeria. On a personal note, he is remembered for his modesty, selfless enthusiasm and quick response to challenges and responsibilities.

He has tirelessly borne the personal expense of attending meetings, meeting people at the airport, seeing them off and dining those who may have a hand in the destiny of libraries in Malaya.

Vision

Wilfred John Plumbe had a great vision and passion for the development of the library and its services. His vision expanded to all libraries including academic, public and school libraries. He was one of the early advocates for the setting up of the school of librarianship at the University of Malaya. He was also very passionate about setting up a National Library and the need for school and public libraries in the country especially so in the rural areas. He was very vocal about the dire need for professional librarians who are Malaysian citizens. This was apparent in his speeches, editorial columns and papers presented at seminars. He was the first president of the Library Association of the Federated Malay States (*Persatuan Perpustakaan Persekutuan Tanah Melayu*) formed on 16th January 1960. He was also one of the first editors of the *Malayan Library Journal* which started publication in October 1960.

He had a vision to establish a school of librarianship to suit local needs. At that time, library staff had to sit for the Library Association (United Kingdom) examination. He organized and conducted classes to assist candidates sitting for the Professional Examination of the Library Association, London. Staff from the University of Malaya as well as from other libraries in the country attended these classes. He pioneered the establishment and promotion of librarianship as a new profession in this country.

Publications

He was a prolific writer on various topics. Amongst his publications are :

- *African Morning Adventures in Nigeria and Sudan*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 2001.
- *African Poems*. Berkshire: Alden & Blackwell, 1951.
- Books and writing in the tropics before the invention of printing. *Malayan Library Journal*, 2(1), 1961, 41-50.
- *Cry of the Fish Eagle*. Glasgow: Dudu NSomba Publications, 1997.
- *Kingdom of Earth: Poems*. London: Williams Norgate, 1939.
- *Libraries and Archives in Fiji : A Chronology*. Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific Library, 1984.
- Libraries and librarianship in Malaya. *Malayan Library Journal*, 1, 1960/61, 2-8.

- Libraries in Indonesia. *Malayan Library Group Newsletter*, 1, 1955, 12-13.
- Libraries in Malaya and Singapore. *Malayan Library Journal*, 3(4), 1964, 40-51
- Libraries of Mediaeval Islam. *Malayan Library Journal*, 2(4), 1962, 130-135.
- Libraries of the Federation of Malaya and Singapore. *Library World*, 64, 1963, 241-244.
- Library Artifacts of 1959-1962 In *The information challenge: a festschrift in honour of Dr. Donald Wijasuriya*. Kuala Lumpur: Knowledge Publishers, 1995, 134-147.
- Note from Nigeria. *Malayan Library Group Newsletter*, 2(1), 1957, 1-6.
- Problems of library planning in the federation of Malaya. *Malayan Library Group Newsletter*, 1(2), 1955, 30-40.
- Preservation of library materials in tropical countries. *Library Trends*, 8(2), 1959, 291-306.
- Protection of books against mildew. *Malayan Library Journal*, 1(2), 1961, 11-13.
- Scientific information facilities in Malaya. *Malayan Library Journal*, 1(2), 1961, 19-28.
- Storage and preservation of books, periodicals and newspapers in tropical climates. *Unesco Bulletin for Libraries*, 12(7), 1958, 156-162.
- *The Golden Pagoda Tree : Adventures in Southeast Asia*. London: Grey Seal, 1990.
- The library of the University of Malaya. *Malayan Library Journal*, 2(2), 1962, 83-93.
- *The Missing Ingredient in Malaya's Development Drive*. Kuala Lumpur: Straits Times, 1960.
- *The Preservation of Books in Tropical and Subtropical Countries*. London : Oxford University Press, 1964.
- The "Stripdex" catalogue. *Library Association Record*, 64, 1962, 128-131.
- Travelling libraries. *Malayan Library Journal*, 2(3), 1962, 119-122.
- *Tropical Librarianship*. New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1987.

Obituary

Wilfred John Plumbe passed into God's care on 25th August 2008. He was 93 years old. A service of thanksgiving for his life and contributions to library development worldwide was held on Saturday, 27th September 2008, at Well Street Community Centre, Well Street, Buckingham.

"In any country where rapid development is to take place, libraries are an economic necessity"

– Wilfred John Plumbe