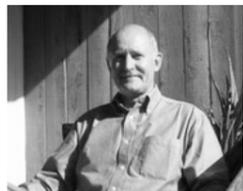


Life as Private Pike - I'm a Failed Librarian



If I could find that section of my passport that people refer to when they say "It says in my passport I'm a ..." (which I can't), then I would say I was a failed librarian. It has a bit of kudos, I think. There aren't too many of us about. Not quite as special as Spike Milligan's 'BA Calcutta (Failed)' but getting there. It came about like this.

Most days, Roger Dean and I would find ourselves tucked away in the school library. Usually we were bunking off from something, games or double maths perhaps, but it was the one place you were sure not to be spotted by a teacher. We didn't read the books, of course. Magazines were our speciality and there was a good selection. We both loved Punch and especially the cartoons.

Roger was especially keen on Der Stern. Neither of us had a word of German, of course, but Rog liked the pictures. Even then he was in training for the babe magnet he was soon to become and it gave him ideas about what girls might like. In contrast, I was gripped by the Times Literary Supplement. There seemed to be pages and pages of jobs for librarians, some of them paying as much as £1,000 a year. Having a bit of a liking for books, I had nevertheless ruled out publishing as a career, not being an Oxbridge-educated feminist from North London with a little place in Brighton for the weekends, but libraries, especially public ones, looked a good bet for a balanced working class kid from the North. Balanced because I had chips on both shoulders but more of that later.

I duly toddled off for an interview with the Halifax Chief Librarian, Mr Pritchard. I met him in his very dusty office in People's Park and he certainly looked the part. If you asked a 7-year old to draw a public librarian, it would be him; a sort of early and rather dishevelled Jacob Rees-Mogg, with rimless specs, a tall angular shape to him and a somewhat diffident and vague air. He told me a little bit about the job and explained that there was no way he could employ me. I think he probably even had to buy his own biscuits, so I wasn't surprised. He did however, being a nice sort of chap, point me in the direction of the West Riding County Library, which august organisation recruited, seemingly, heaps of youngsters each year to take part in a training course prior to going off to Library School.

Some time later I found myself in the

vividly different office of Mr W.J. Murison, County Librarian. A vast space, it was expensively furnished with carpets and real wood furniture in the fashionable Danish style. He gazed sternly at me across a huge desk. I felt, if I had known it at the time, like the miniscule Dennis Waterman character in Little Britain. Mr Murison, I was to learn, was a doyen of the library world, who drove an S-type Jag and rarely, if ever, descended from his lair onto the library floor. I felt him warming to me when he asked me what was the longest river in the world and I pontificated about it switching between the Nile and the Amazon and I thought it was currently the Nile. He then grilled me fairly comprehensively about my likes and reading, looking faintly interested when I spouted on about all the new dramatists I was reading, like Wesker, Edward Albee, David Mercer and, of course, Pinter. I took him through my (I thought) extensive knowledge of 19th century novelists, especially Hardy, and thought I was really motoring. Leaning forward, he said, "Don't you read any contemporary novelists?" and reeled off a list of people I'd barely heard of but which I presume included Murdoch, Brophy et al. I forgot all about the Amis, Braine and John Wain books I had read and was about to clam up but then came out with the astonishing claim that "Actually I don't think many novels published since about 1930 have been worth publishing, let alone reading".

To say his face clouded over would be a complete understatement and I thought I saw him begin to rise from his chair in the early stage of dismissing me from his presence when something extraordinary happened. From across the vast room came a heavily accented, middle-European voice from someone I hadn't even noticed was there in the twenty or so minutes I'd been sat down. "You know, he is exactly right; zer is nothing but rubbish being published zese days!". And this was my first sight of Joe Feiweles, a character I was to love and respect in equal measure in years to come. Joe, Murison's deputy and my future chief, being a rather diminutive four foot nothing, with the character and swagger of a Napoleon, came out from sitting behind a large table. He was so short he could equally have come from underneath it for all I knew but

I was shocked and heartened at the same time.

I later learned that Joe was good friends with the late, lamented and loved history teacher Mr Stone, as they had been at university together and lived near each other in Batley. But they can't have swapped notes on me, as I got the job. Thus began a twelve-year period of my life which was rich in happiness and professional challenges. I was joining the West Riding County, though I didn't know it at the time, at the zenith of its fame and power. In 1968 it lent and borrowed more books than any other public library system in the



The opening of the West Riding County Library new HQ back in 1964
Joe Feiweles is pictured at the front

world and bought every non-fiction book published for its immense joint reserve stock. For someone who loved books it was heaven and the heaven was sweetened by the large numbers of young people it recruited, some of whom became firm friends. What joy we had persecuting the tea lady, Mrs Murgatroyd, who could have been the model for Mrs Overall. Too often she found her tea trolley sheltering in the gents lavatory, while she was on her rounds, or sent down to the lower floor by lift without her, while she took a worthy's tea into their office.

My student days, after a year's training, were vastly improved by being sent to Loughborough Library School on full salary (all £650 of it) by the West Riding under their training scheme, with the proviso that I had to go back and work for them for at least two years. Being a student who could afford to run a small car, albeit a very old one, was a distinct advantage, especially as my year's intake of students consisted of about 80 girls and about 12 boys. As at least half the boys were of a Wildean disposition, that left more girls for the rest of us, so little actual work was done. It felt very much like an extension of my school days. It helped that I was newly single. My marriage to Jean had not survived the arrival on the scene of Brian, who had his own stone-built semi and a Triumph sports car in a

fetching shade of red. As I didn't have the proverbial two halfpennies, and no ambition to remedy that situation, discretion became the better part of valour and I left the field. In truth he was a much better family man than I could ever be and it was all to the good.

I had to grow up at some point of course and I returned for my two years of penal servitude at Grimethorpe branch library. I think it was meant to be a punishment for me ignoring a plaintive request from the area librarian I reported to, to turn up during the holidays for branch work. However, as the request was sent in writing, in the halcyon days before email, I was able to claim non-receipt and went off hitchhiking in France instead, where I met many Americans doing the 1960s version of the Grand Tour.

Grimethorpe, in fact, was no punishment. To describe the people of that little god-forsaken town as salt of the earth is like accusing Donald Trump of mild narcissism. They loved their library and it was a real centre of activity (a bit like the Rovers Return without the beer) - musical evenings, poetry readings, even a play, put on by the kids from the local down-at-heel middle school during their holidays, the rude mechanicals play from Midsummer Night's Dream, no less. The headmaster, the appropriately named Mr Brunt, said "Tha mun be an idiot lad - they'd niver heard of bloody Shakespeare before thee came along".

My days at Grimethorpe came to an end when the demise of the West Riding became imminent and Joe Feiweles rescued me from a future career with Barnsley Metropolitan by bringing me back to HQ. A short spell as a cataloguer, pondering the correct shelf location of 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance' and, more intriguingly, 'The Joy of Sex' and then I became the reference librarian for the Wakefield District, again under Joe. My other debt of gratitude for this period of my life is that, behind the library counter, I found Diane. She was 18 years old and a very pretty ingénue and I thought I'd better snap her up before someone else did. We married when she was 20 and I've loved her unremittingly (to her great annoyance I'm sure) ever since, despite her propensity to take in every stray inquilinous particoloured quadruped, not to mention worms, snails, toads and hedgehogs, which all need 'rescuing'. And her habit of buying up every houseplant that 'looks as though it needs a drink' has left us with a house that resembles an early episode of Zoo Quest.

After several more years at Wakefield, I decamped to Northumberland to become county Technical Librarian. Still a librarian, you see, and not yet failed or failing, another enjoyable posting. If the Grimethorpe denizens are salt of the earth

then the people of the northeast are the saltiest of the salty; warm-hearted, open and generous and my professional colleagues were hardworking, dedicated and funny. But it was here that I began my slide out of libraries and into another, murkier world. No I didn't hit the bottle or take to opium dens. I built a small networked microcomputer system. It was George Laughton's fault. As County Librarian he had coerced the councillors to give him a bit of money to put computers in libraries. This was the early 1980s, when the government were putting BBC micros into schools and starting (and failing, largely) to bring IT to the masses. George thought it was time to give the parents a look at what the kids were up to, so he obtained a small sum (£10,000 from memory) and asked me to spend it wisely. So a number of our branches ended up with said BBC micros, all linked via Micronet and able to go online. Great fun.

However, when George retired a year or so later and his deputy got his job, I applied for the deputy's job. And I didn't get it. Not only that; the chap who did wasn't much older than me; time to exit stage left. I took my newly acquired computer skills south to the British Institute of Management, as head of information. Still a librarian but now much more of a manager and tasked with automating the whole shooting match. A slippery slope.

You may not have heard of the British Institute of Management. I'm sure in its present incarnation it's first rate but then it was going through a bit of a crisis. In fact it was wholly misnamed. British, well yes, as it was based in Corby and London (another slippery slope for me) it was very British. Institute, yes, in every sense of that word, including the less attractive ones. Management? As Mr Stone used to say, three dots will do ...

I found myself, three years on, in London, a place I never wanted to work in or be near really. Those chips I mentioned earlier, you see. Another, much bigger automation project, this time putting two national newspapers, The Times and The Sunday Times, into a database, so that they could be accessed by journalists and delivered to the outside world. Interesting, fascinating even, but not strictly speaking a library, not a public service (in no way can making money for Rupert Murdoch be termed public service) and away from my beloved North.

Things happen to you. Here I was in a completely different world from the one I started out in and wondering how I got there. It all went rather well, despite me. The databases got built and sold, others added to them, news data exchanged with other Fleet Street offices and then along came the Web. I never actually got promoted but instead found myself sort of shunted up the organisation to do Inter-

netty stuff. And the organisation(s) I worked in, in what we still called Fleet Street were very different from the Grimethorpes and Northumberlands of this world.

Don't get me wrong, it was always fun. Challenging too. As I got more senior, I found I was working alongside two distinct kinds of people. There were the old, ink in the veins, let's get the paper out, 'if it bleeds it leads' Fleet Street types. Many of these had knuckles that trailed on the ground when they walked and faces like Harvey Weinstein. The other type, because this was an industry in transition (not to say turmoil), were the MBAs, two or three degrees (usually Harvard and Princeton or Insead), former consultants from Boston Consulting or McKinsey. They were somewhat more frightening and as far from the world of libraries as possible, despite their fancy educations. And we all worked together, trying to make sense of an industry that was under attack from the new media types from Silicon Valley.

I was in the industry for over 20 years until I stepped off the full-time rollercoaster in 2007, then continuing for several more as a consultant. During that time I developed a defence mechanism that seemed to work (well, at least I never got sacked, unusual in that industry, despite once calling the then editor of The Times a pillock). In the face of all this 'cool' overt metropolitan, capital-centred internationalism, I became more deliberately provincial. My accent stayed northern, I still cracked jokes in meetings (who is this guy?) and I always, always allowed people to underestimate me (not difficult that bit). Northern, working-class, ex-librarian, grammar school boy with a funny accent? Well we don't have to worry about him. Think of Private Pike with a northern accent and that's who I was. Stupid boy. It worked, I suppose. I made many fine friends and still keep in touch with them; we call it The Escape Committee. I did an interesting job, or jobs, and it paid well. I left when I felt like it and not before. But I wasn't a librarian. I failed at that.

Thinking about this reunion after half a century, it seems to me that Crossleys gave me something precious that has got me through life. A happy childhood, with friends and teachers I can admire and respect over this great void even now. Values worth having, of kindness, respect and gentle humour that you don't often find in the rough world outside, but which sustain you for a lifetime. On my last report, Terry Ryan put just two words, 'Cheerfully idle'. Sounds good enough for me. Thanks Crossleys and thank you friends for sustaining me. You may not know it but you have.

RICHARD WITHEY ('SPIV')
(1961 - 1968)