William John Harris was born in 1903 in Oamaru, but his early life was very much bound up with the city of Christchurch and with Christ's College, in particular. His grandfather, the Rev. William Chambers Harris, had been called to Christchurch from Oxford in 1865 to assume the headmastership of Christ's College, an office which he held until illness forced his resignation after eight years. The Venerable Archdeacon (as he later became) sent his three sons to be educated at the College and they in turn sent their sons, so that in the first two decades of this century nine Harrises, brothers and cousins, attended the school.

John entered Christ's College in May 1913. His father, Edward Harris, was station manager for a large sheep-farming company and an officer in the territorial army. When war broke out, Captain Harris went to France with the N.Z. Maori (Pioneer) Battalion and was dangerously wounded in the battle of Bezzantin Ridge in September 1916. He died of his wounds three days later.

In his last year at school, 1922, John was head prefect. He then accepted a position as tutor at Christ's College and remained there until April 1926 when he left to read history at Oxford. He had already attended courses at the Canterbury University College, and he completed a B.A. degree at Oxford in 1929. During his vacations he travelled extensively on the continent of Europe, and after leaving Oxford he worked for a time in Canadian lumber camps before returning to New Zealand.

In September 1930, John Harris resumed his position on the teaching staff of Christ's College, where he remained until the end of the following year. Perhaps his most notable achievement was the founding of a small printing press, and there exists a small volume of poems by his friend Stephen Gerard, which bears the imprint 'Printed by John Harris at the Christ's College Press, 1932.'

His European and Canadian experiences had sown the first seeds of radicalism and he returned a much keener and more critical observer of the placid New Zealand scene, which was presently to be convulsed by the onslaught of the world-wide economic depression. Yet his first response to the apparent hopelessness and despair which came in the wake of economic collapse was an attempt at
escape. Late in 1931 Harris and five other Christ's College old boys jointly bought a 66-foot ketch, the Waterlily, and they spent the early months of 1932 fitting her out for deep-sea travel. 'It is their intention', reported the College Register, 'to sail whither fortune directs them and to enjoy the freedom of the sea until they have made arrangements to do something else.' More specifically, they planned to travel extensively through the islands of the South Pacific and then via Singapore and Ceylon round the coasts of Africa to Britain. Stephen Gerard was master of the expedition — his main claim to command was that he had earlier sailed a small vessel from Britain across the Atlantic to Barbados where the ship was wrecked.

Towards the end of March the Waterlily was ready for the big voyage. Like the crusaders of old, the crew carried with them a presentation flag which had been specially blessed at St. Saviour's Church, but an experience of a different nature awaited them in Auckland where Harris and his friends witnessed the unemployed riots, perhaps the worst outbreak of civil disorder in New Zealand's relatively tranquil industrial history. From Auckland they headed north and for more than a year the Waterlily cruised in the South Seas visiting different island groups. Some of the crew members returned to New Zealand but three of them, Harris and Gerard and a South Sea Islander, were on the ketch when she was ship-wrecked early in 1933 at Vaitupu, a tiny atoll in the Gilbert & Ellice group. They were marooned on the island for a month until at last a small trading vessel rescued them and took them to Funafuti. From there they were sent home, much to their amusement, as 'distressed British Seamen' at the colonial administration's expense, arriving in Auckland clad in khaki shirts and shorts which was all they had saved from the wreck.

Harris remained in Auckland and for the next twelve months, as was reported later, he 'engaged in literary work'. This suitably vague phrase covered not only adult education lectures and radio talks on his Pacific travels, on Oxford and on other topics, but also a somewhat bohemian existence which brought him into close association with radical extremist groups in the city. New Zealand was still in the depth of economic depression and the Government had kept on the statute book repressive emergency legislation originally passed during World War I in order to stifle expressions of discontent. Censorship of imported left-wing publications, loyalty oaths for teachers, and bans on meetings and processions were some of the restrictions on civil liberties then in force, which met with opposition from an enlightened minority, particularly in Auckland. One such cause which Harris took up was that of the Yugoslav-born Communist Ivan Tomasevic who had been denaturalised and threatened with deportation to his home country. In October 1933 Harris became secretary of the Tomasevic Defence Committee, later renamed the Civil Liberties League, and he represented this group on the Auckland Anti-War Council.

There is no evidence thus far that Harris had any particular interest in libraries although he had assisted with the library at Christ's College. It was probably his marriage in 1934 and the consequent need for a more settled existence which attracted him to apply for the position of librarian advertised by Otago University.

University libraries in New Zealand were then in a very parlous state. 'Their status is low and their influence on college life and thought is unimportant', reported the Munn-Barr survey of 1934. 'The book collections are much too small to support effective undergraduate instruction, and they offer little or nothing to advanced students and faculty members. Bibliographical aids are few, and even the cataloguing of the collections betrays generally the lack of training in present or former staff members . . . A staff of three, including the librarian, is the largest one found . . .' At Otago University there was a library staff of two and, said the report, 'Otago needs everything — more books, space and personnel.'

To remedy this state of affairs, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, in 1931, had offered each of the four university colleges a grant for book purchases of $5000 a year for three years, on condition that the colleges sent their librarian, if a graduate, for training overseas in an accredited school of library science, or where no suitably qualified librarian was in charge, as was the case at Otago and Canterbury, that a selected graduate be sent for training on this Carnegie Fellowship and appointed university librarian on his or her return. The Otago University Council deferred acceptance of this offer so as to allow its current librarian to complete a B.A. degree, but in 1934 the Council decided to advertise the Carnegie Fellowship after all. Harris applied from Auckland and was appointed, primarily of course on the basis of his academic record but also, it is said, because of his prowess on the rugby field where he had represented Christ's College and University College, in Oxford.
The committee which made the appointment was unaware of Harris's political associations in Auckland and it must have come as a considerable shock when the police authorities made representations in Dunedin to the effect that the librarian-elect was a man of extreme communist views. A local newspaper even reported that Harris had acted as the Communist Party's secretary in Auckland, but this was denied the following day.

There is a well-known tag:
Lives there a man with soul so dead
Who was not, in the thirties, red?
but in New Zealand at least advanced political views were the exception, not only among Christ's College men, as might be expected, but even among librarians. Academic freedoms suffered severely at the hand of university councils and it is greatly to the credit of the Otago University authorities in what is perhaps the most conservative of New Zealand's four main cities, that they upheld Harris's appointment although they expected it, it is said, an undertaking that he would keep his views to himself.

The Carnegie Corporation suggested that holders of the Fellowship attend the Library School at the University of Michigan. When the American Consul in Auckland refused Harris the visa necessary for entry into the United States, there were angry questions in Parliament in which Walter Nash, soon to become Minister of Finance in the first Labour Cabinet, referred to Harris as 'a young student of the finest type, against whom the only evidence was that he was opposed to war', while another Labour member praised him as 'a brilliant young scholar.' The Consul however, seems to have had no other choice because when completing the application form for a visa Harris 'could not conscientiously deny that he favoured the overthrow of capitalism by force.'

Instead of Michigan, Harris enrolled at the School of Librarianship of the University of London and in September 1934 he sailed from Auckland for England. In London he obtained a tourist visa to the United States and after completing his studies he was able to visit Michigan and other American university libraries on the way back to New Zealand. In September 1935, he took up his appointment as librarian at the University of Otago.

Within months of his appointment Harris submitted to the Chancellor of the University a report on the university library, with proposals for reorganisation and development. Although in many respects, he wrote, the situation was far more promising then he had been led to believe, he still had many criticisms to make. The collections were dispersed in numerous departmental libraries, accommodation was totally inadequate, and lack of staff meant that even the existing book stock, poor as it was, could not be fully exploited.

'Thousands of books in the attic are uncatalogued,' wrote Harris, 'pamphlet material has been neglected entirely, there is no proper subject catalogue, nor any cataloguing service provided for the departmental libraries.' The catalogue was in some twelve separate parts on different-sized cards. None of the books was marked on the back, 'a deficiency which adds greatly to the daily work of the staff, and, by making it impossible to keep books in their correct places on the shelves, renders the catalogue largely useless'. No money had been made available for general purposes and there was an almost total lack of reference books and bibliographies.

On the basis of Harris's recommendations the university library was completely reorganised in the next few years. In 1942, he could report that staff had more than trebled, recataloguing and classification were nearing completion and, pending the preparation of plans for a new building, accommodation had been greatly enlarged by the opening up of basements and attics. Most important, apart from the training of a capable staff, was the process of integration through centralisation of cataloguing and servicing of all university book collections, and close co-operation with other New Zealand libraries through inter-library loans, exchange of duplicates, and co-ordination of buying policies to prevent unnecessary overlapping. In a speech at a library conference, Harris, inspired perhaps by his travels on the Waterlily, compared libraries to the sea: while the primary school library was 'a safe sheltered place' where the child may voyage 'endlessly without losing sight of shore, without fear of storm or uncharted rock', the university library became to the student 'a large and terrifying place, with books extending beyond the limits of one person's sight. It spreads out over a wide variety of subjects, many of them unknown to the newcomer even by name. It has depths of specialisation frightening to the uninitiated, and uncharted seas of statistical and archive material waiting to be explored.'

It was the librarian's task to help the student by charting this 'ocean of printed matter which the world increasingly pours forth.' Among the navigational aids provided by Harris at Otago University were monthly Notes and Accessions...
which listed not only books but also reprints, bulletins and other more ephemeral material, an annual Guide to the library, and a List of Periodical and Serial Holdings Currently Received. Special attention was paid to the listing of newspaper files and thesises and to the speedy cataloguing of New Zealand official publications. The library also began compiling an index to the major local newspaper, the Otago Daily Times.

Harris had little respect for the Dewey system of classification which, he claimed, 'had been applied, or misapplied, to portions of the Library' with the result that the shelves revealed 'a potch of Dewey bastardised by a succession of misapplied, orstoffening classifier.' In his first report he proposed the adoption of the Library of Congress classification but when Bliss published his schedules, Harris switched to the new system which he claimed was best suited to the needs of academic libraries. He became the foremost protagonist of Bliss in New Zealand and from Otago the system spread to a number of other New Zealand libraries, usually where former Otago staff members had been appointed to positions of responsibility.

Another early enthusiasm was for the use of microfilm which Harris saw as the means whereby the treasures of accumulated knowledge could be opened to scholars in countries as remote as New Zealand. In 1939, the Otago University Library bought its first microfilm reader.

Staff training was an important aspect of this reorganisation of the university library. There were then no library training courses available in New Zealand, and it was left to Harris to pass on the knowledge he had gained overseas in regular lectures to his staff. In 1943, the University Council approved a proposal that these instructional lectures be made available to a wider circle of academic staff, research and honours students, as well as librarians engaged in reference work. Harris was appointed Lecturer in Bibliography and Librarianship and conducted two weekly lecture courses throughout the academic year, one in bibliography and reference work, the other in library organisation, cataloguing and classification.

Similar instructional lectures were given to members of the Otago Society of Librarians which Harris had helped to found in 1936 and which became soon afterwards the Otago Branch of the New Zealand Library Association. Harris, with A. G. W. Dunningham, then librarian of the Dunedin Public Library, was the presiding genius in this group and the inspiration behind many pioneering bibliographical projects undertaken in Dunedin.

To mark the annual conference of the Library Association which met in Dunedin in February 1941, the branch produced a film, 'Books in Dunedin', and Harris edited a mimeographed booklet on Dunedin Libraries and Book Resources. Branch members also compiled the first tentative Index to New Zealand Periodicals, but the major project and the one with which Harris was most closely associated was the compilation of a union list of serials in New Zealand libraries.

Soon after the outbreak of war, members of the Otago University library staff decided as their contribution to national service to devote several hours of their own time each week to the compilation of a union list. The difficulties were immense because of the varying and usually very low cataloguing standards in New Zealand libraries and the lack of bibliographical reference works. Many, including the largest New Zealand libraries, had obviously only the faintest notion of standard cataloguing practice, complained Harris. In Wellington, the largest library centre, not one copy of Gregory's Union List was available.

By mid-1941, the card file had grown to 5,000 entries and the Library Association (Harris was convenor of its Union List of Serials Committee) decided to sacrifice comprehensiveness for speedy publication and to produce a preliminary Check List of Serials in New Zealand Libraries in mimeographed form. Harris hoped that this list could be followed within two years by a comprehensive Union List but this proved impossible. In 1945, he brought out a Supplement to the Check List but the Union List was still incomplete in card form by the time he left New Zealand. Responsibility for its compilation was transferred, after his departure, to the National Library Centre in Wellington and it was only in 1953 that the Union List finally emerged from this prolonged gestation.

Another project on which Harris was working was an annotated guide to New Zealand reference works. He published short lists in 1937-38 in Tomorrow, a left-wing journal of opinion, and in New Zealand Libraries; he lectured on the subject in Dunedin; and in 1945 he produced the first preliminary Guide to New Zealand Reference Material. This mimeographed booklet of 62 pages formed the basis of a lecture course he gave at the newly established Library School in Wellington. An enlarged version, almost twice the size though still only mimeographed, was published in 1947.
by the New Zealand Library Association. The small edition of only 200 copies sold within a year and a printed second edition of the ‘Harris Guide,’ as it came to be called, appeared in 1950, after the author had left New Zealand.

From the first conference which he attended, in Wellington in February 1937, Harris was an active member of New Zealand Library Association. Indeed the printed record of this conference shows him as the mover of a resolution, which was carried, ‘That this Conference advises a general expansive policy during the next few years.’ He was a member of the Association’s Council almost continuously from 1937, active on many committees, and president in 1946-47.

His entry into library work, and in fact his period of fourteen years’ service at Otago, coincided almost exactly with the term of office of the first Labour Government, and Harris’s work at Otago and for New Zealand librarianship as a whole, was part of and contributed to the general social and intellectual renewal which marked those years. When he entered the New Zealand library profession, it was, in his own vivid phrase, ‘largely prostituted to handing out commonplace books to commonplace minds.’ Harris not only transformed the Otago University Library from a haphazard collection of mostly uncatologued books into the best university library in the country, but also helped to transform the library profession in New Zealand into a vigorous and lively body of women and men, still overworked and underpaid, but aware of the problems that faced them and imbued with a justified pride in their achievements.

It goes without saying that John Harris had interests and activities outside the library field. His Valedictory by Clifford Collins in New Zealand Libraries, December 1948, mentions ‘adult education work, radio talks and book reviewing, university development, administration of the Dunedin co-operative bookshop “Modern Books,” art and architecture, politics and world affairs.’ His influence made itself felt in many fields but his major achievement will remain his contribution to New Zealand librarianship.

In his presidential address, in 1947, Harris stressed that above all else ‘good libraries are the product of good librarians.’ When he left Otago a year later to take up an appointment at the University of Ibadan, New Zealand lost not merely a good but one of its best librarians.

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