

ROY HARROD AND THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE BODLEIAN QUESTION,

1930-31

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At the end of the 1920s, the space problems which affected the Bodleian Library were felt in all their urgency. A Commission of Inquiry into the Bodleian question was therefore set up by a Decree of Congregation on 4 March 1930, with the task of reporting on possible solutions.² The inquiry was financed by a generous grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.³

The Commission did not reach agreement as to the best solution to the space problem. One of the Commissioners, Roy Harrod, disagreed with the majority proposal and wrote a minority Report. The conflict broadly reflected the gap between the habits of thought of the older scholars and the needs of the younger tutors as to new methods of conducting research, and eventually divided opinion in Oxford along a generational line. A compromise was eventually reached, resulting in the Bodleian Library as it is today.

The story is examined here mainly from Harrod's viewpoint, as it is based on the documents he himself preserved.⁴ This collection seems to be almost complete, as it includes most of the memoranda, minutes of meetings, reports of visits to other libraries, architects' plans, and correspondence between Harrod and other members of the Commission, in particular the Secretary and the Chairman. Conversely, the Bodleian archives do not seem to hold many relevant documents, while the Rockefeller Archives Centre houses the documents relating mainly to the financial aspects of the matter and the involvement of the Rockefeller Foundation. Harrod's side of the story therefore appears to be the only one throwing light on the events leading to the reorganization of the Bodleian and to this specific aspect of the struggle for new methods of research in Oxford.

The Commission was chaired by Sir Henry Miers of Magdalen College, reputed to be one of the most distinguished authorities on museums in Britain and a former president of the Museums Association; its members were Sir Frederic Kenyon of Magdalen and of New College,

and Director of the British Museum, Sir Edmund Chambers (Corpus Christi), G. N. Clark (Oriel), and Roy Harrod. Kenneth Sisam (Merton) of the Oxford University Press was invited to act as Secretary. Harrod, who at the time was thirty and Senior Censor of Christ Church, was by far the youngest member of the Commission.

The Commission met regularly for about a year, and its report was published in March 1931. Its first aim was to gather evidence as to the needs of the Bodleian and the solutions adopted by other libraries in Oxford. This task was accomplished by inviting memoranda from scholars, lecturers, and representatives of departmental studies, as well as from the staff of Oxford libraries.⁵

The Commission also examined the organization of other libraries in the world. During the course of three trips abroad, the commissioners visited Rome and Paris (8-17 April 1930), some German, Swiss and Scandinavian libraries (5-25 July 1930), and twelve public libraries and fifteen university libraries in the United States and in Canada (3 September-1 November 1930).⁶ The results of this evidence are summarised in the Bodleian Library Commission *Report and Recommendations*;⁷ however, it is interesting to remark that Harrod's own notes on the American visit reveal that he was interested both in the architectural solutions advanced in other libraries to meet accommodation and future needs of expansion, and in the system of access to shelves.

On the return from the visit to the American libraries, a fundamental disagreement emerged between the views of Harrod and those of the rest of the Commission. The majority of the Commission intended to recommend the enlargement of the reading rooms of the historic Bodleian, to be furnished with the 100,000 most frequently required books, and the construction of a new site in Broad Street to be connected by means of a tunnel. Harrod thought that this solution was not satisfactory as the new building could only host a limited number of books, and as neither facilities for research nor open access to the stacks was guaranteed.

The divergence of opinion is first mentioned in a letter Harrod received from the chairman of the Commission on 4 November. At first Miers was favourably impressed by Harrod's 'temperate attitude', but soon the dissent must have taken harsher tones. Miers had in fact to remind Harrod twice that it had been decided that the proceedings of the Commission were to be kept secret,⁸ which indicates that Harrod wished instead to inform public opinion of the position of the Commission. By mid-November, Harrod had drafted three memoranda,⁹ from which the

reason for disagreement with the proposal of the other commissioners becomes apparent.

In a memorandum on 'Intake',¹⁰ Harrod provided an analysis of the annual rate of intake of the Bodleian, and illustrated the general trend. Although (because of the war) the series of data was irregular, Harrod inferred that the pre-war rate of increase of intake had not come to an end, and speculated that there could be a permanent acceleration. Based on an arithmetic progression, Harrod estimated the number of new volumes in 100 years to be about 3.8 million; on a geometric progression (rate 2.3%), it would be about 8.18 million; Harrod suggested that the lower figure be regarded as a minimum, because the rate of increase was taken from pre-war figures, and deliberate increases in foreign purchases had not been taken into account.

In a later memorandum on the 'Capacity of the Broad St. Site for Stack',¹¹ Harrod revised his estimate, and suggested that a five million-volume capacity library would last less than 100 years. However, he recognised that 100 years is an unduly long period to plan for, and that therefore a five million-volume storage capacity would be reasonable. The capacity of the Broad Street building would be between 2.88 and 3.22 million volumes, or about 4.4 million if readers' desks were eliminated completely and building extended underground. Given practical difficulties (shelves not completely full because of the classification system, etc.), he estimated the maximum theoretical capacity to be 4.05 million books. The new building, being limited by important roads and by Trinity College, could not be significantly expanded. Harrod concluded that the problem would soon emerge again.

In an 'Addendum',¹² Harrod further remarked that his previous 'conservative' estimate was foolish. New calculations based on the American rate of intake suggested to him that a stack based on 5 million volumes would last somewhere between 63 and 100 years. Harrod concluded that 'to build on a closed site is in any event a policy of doubtful wisdom'. The building in Broad Street would be able to accommodate 3 million books, that is about 2 million new ones, and would last for between 40 and 57 years. If the site had to be closed and expansion impossible or limited, Harrod suggested the need to plan for five million books. But he thought it would be wiser to have a small building to begin with, designed, however, to be easily expandable.

The conclusion Harrod drew from the analysis presented in his memoranda was that a permanent solution of the library problem in Oxford would require a site large enough to allow expansion when further

space for books was needed, and architectural planning to make this practicable. But the University had already opted for the use of an area in Broad Street, opposite the old building of the Bodleian, and this decision had weight with the other commissioners.¹³ The proposal of the majority was therefore to build on the designated site, and to connect the old building to the new one by means of a tunnel, the new building being designed to be essentially a store for books to be delivered by mechanical means to the improved reading rooms around the Bodleian quadrangle.

Probably aware of the weight carried by the University decision and the preferences expressed by the rest of the Commission, Harrod was prepared to compromise. During the meeting of 20 November,¹⁴ Harrod declared he was willing to accept the Broad Street solution, provided that the new building was considered not a mere place of storage but as a proper library where research could be carried out. Miers appreciated Harrod's conciliatory statement, and hoped that it would be possible to reach an agreement, thus preventing the division of opinion in Oxford.¹⁵ However, the commissioners did not accept Harrod's request, largely on the ground of different estimates as to the capacity of the Broad Street building.¹⁶ At this point Harrod found co-operation to be impossible, and decided that he had to write a separate report.¹⁷

At first Harrod intended to suggest what he thought to be the best solution to the Bodleian question: the construction of an entirely new library. After some negotiation regarding the procedure to be followed, he obtained from Miers permission to consult an architect.¹⁸ He inquired about the problems relating to planning permission, and to the re-classification and re-stacking of the million or so books housed in the Bodleian.¹⁹ A first draft of Harrod's report²⁰ outlines the main points of dissent from the remainder of the Commission and formulates the proposal to build an entirely new library. In order of importance, the reasons why Harrod could not agree with the solution proposed by the majority were: 1) the fact that the Broad Street site was both small and confined; the problem was thus bound to recur within fifty years; 2) the division of the library into two parts, one on either side of Broad Street, would make it impossible to provide efficient and convenient services of the kind to which scholars were becoming accustomed elsewhere. This would be detrimental to the prestige of the University; 3) the Broad Street solution would be more expensive in relation to the service provided; 4) the Broad Street building would be noisy on two sides; 5) this solution also blocked the best way of solving certain subsidiary but not unimportant problems connected with other Oxford libraries.

Harrod made clear that by 'convenient kind of services' he meant essentially access to the shelves for specially qualified readers. In his report he mentioned that this practice was common in continental universities and universal in the United States. He also discussed the related problems of classification, judging however that books acquired after 1883 were already classified by subject in a sufficiently precise manner, while for those acquired before that date re-classification was necessary. Harrod also pointed out that open shelves required that carrels should be placed adjacent to them.

Harrod's solution was to build a new library, using the existing buildings for specific purposes, for example for providing an undergraduate reading room and a library of incunabula. He did not propose an immense building, but a modest one designed so that it could be further expanded on a site where this was possible. Harrod indicated that such a site was available at less than five minutes' walk from the centre of the city, on or near the site where St Catherine's College was later to be built.

As a second best, to be adopted as an alternative to the majority report in case the University was too attached to the existing building and did not feel like renouncing it, Harrod suggested that it would be possible to accept the Broad Street site, but only provided that one third of the space should be left unoccupied (arranged vertically from floor to roof), so that it could be turned into what might be needed according to the evolution of demand. On the majority's solution, Harrod's main point of disagreement was that if the library was to be divided at all, the only logical form of division would be between reading rooms and open shelves: the division of books should not be between the 100,000 most required ones and the others, because this would stultify the readers working at the open shelves without bringing much advantage to the readers in the reading rooms.

At a later stage, however, for reasons which the surviving documents do not make clear, Harrod changed his mind, and radically shifted the emphasis of his Report.²¹ Instead of resolutely criticising the Broad Street site as inadequate and proposing an entirely new building, Harrod adopted an attitude more suitable for compromise: 'I have endeavoured throughout to write it in a constructive and not destructive spirit'.²² He reduced to an incidental remark his previous claim that a new library was necessary, he accepted the principle of the Broad Street site, subject however to some conditions, and concentrated his criticism of the Majority Report on the grounds that it did not attach sufficient importance to the two principles of accessibility and concentration, and that it

did not offer a permanent solution. As to the first point, Harrod opened his report with a long discussion on the advantages of open shelves, pointing out that this would be incompatible with the proposal to keep the 100,000 most-used volumes in the reading rooms. Harrod's argument was based on the perspective that such an arrangement was not likely to reflect the way in which research would be pursued in Oxford.²³ He therefore recommended a new building in Broad Street, asking however that it be equipped with stacks to hold three million fully accessible books and with reading cubicles, that ample space be devoted to research rooms, and that two independent wings for Rhodes House and the library of the Taylor Institution be provided. The latter request was meant to concentrate these facilities within a single building. In order to have more space available, Harrod proposed the construction of a separate repository for one million volumes less requested by readers. In his opinion, the number of books in the reading rooms should not be increased (save of course for dictionaries and reference works).

After tiresome negotiations as to the length of the Report,²⁴ it was finally published on 10 March 1931. At this point it was up to Congregation to accept or reject either of the two Reports. The press reported widely²⁵ on the division of opinion within Congregation, and in some cases took the side of one of the factions (the Oxford correspondent of *The Manchester Guardian*, for instance, stated on 29 April 1931 that 'Harrod's plan [was] vastly superior to the report of the majority'). Opinion in Oxford seems to have been divided as well, with the young members of the Hebdomadal Council more favourable to Harrod's plan on the grounds that it would do more for the development of research. This was an important issue at the time. Research, in fact, was carried out by college fellows and University professors in the time left free by their other duties. Further development of graduate studies was, however, envisaged by some, and Harrod's proposal allowed for it.²⁶

According to the press reports prior to the decision of the Council, Harrod's plan seems to have found wide support in the University. Harrod wrote to Smith that he did not want to make propaganda for his proposal, although he was available to explain the details of his plans and the reasons for suggesting it to anybody who desired to hear such an explanation. Nonetheless, the matter was 'naturally rather near [his] heart',²⁷ and he did not miss the chance of exerting pressure upon the Rockefeller Foundation in favour of the position of the younger generation of dons. When Jacob Viner visited Oxford, Harrod expounded to him the difficulties he was having in terms of an opposition between

those who wanted 'to preserve the old Liberal Arts College tradition' and those who acknowledged that the University needed an expansion into the field of research. The signatories of the Majority Report—who, in Harrod's opinion, represented a minority in the University—apparently attempted to gain a consensus, arguing that divided opinion would cause the withdrawal of the Rockefeller Foundation's support. Harrod therefore convinced Viner to ask the Rockefeller officials to drop a hint to the Vice-Chancellor as to their actual position. Viner was convinced of Harrod's argument, and it would seem that a 'casual visit' of a Rockefeller official to Oxford actually took place.²⁸

Besides Harrod's direct action to gain support from the Rockefeller Foundation, it must be noted that the Minority Report seemed to be more acceptable than the Majority Report at the Rockefeller headquarters. W. W. Bishop, Librarian at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, who had organised, on the Rockefeller Foundation's suggestion, the Commission's American visit, appreciated Harrod's Report as more likely to meet future needs of research in Oxford, while he was disappointed with the Majority's proposal.²⁹

It is with this background that at Oxford the matter was taken in hand by A. H. Smith of New College, who acted as spokesman for the supporters of a new library. After ten days of negotiation, he managed to have a compromise accepted which allowed for experimentation along the lines proposed by Harrod in the new building in Broad Street, including the possibility of internally converting the building, open access to shelves, the provision of cubicles and research rooms for small groups of advanced students, and a separate repository for little-wanted material. There was agreement that the experiment should be tried fairly, under the supervision of a special committee. This compromise was accepted without opposition on 19 May 1931 by the Hebdomadal Council.

On the whole, as he wrote to Sadler after the debate was finally over, Harrod was 'satisfied with the Bodleian result. The Resolutions secure that an adaptable building be put up, with greater freedom of experiment than was ever contemplated by the majority. Without them we should have been at the mercy of those who sought to interpret the Decree in the light of the Majority Report Only. . . . Smith had a tremendous fight to get the resolution accepted and I was amazed at his success!'³⁰

During 1934–35, Harrod was a member of the Bodleian Library Building Committee, which was charged with putting into practice the decisions taken by Congregation in 1931.³¹ The foundation stone of the Broad Street extension was finally laid by Queen Mary on 25 June 1937.

In the event it was to contain none of the experimental features proposed. Whilst at Oxford library space is once again a pressing problem, with books having to be stored outside the city, at Cambridge there was space recently to build an extension immediately adjoining the University Library, which had been constructed afresh in 1931–4 on a site to the west of the Backs. The current generation of Bodleian readers and staff may have cause to wonder whether the University should not have listened more closely to the views of Roy Harrod.

¹ I am grateful to the Editor and an anonymous reader for their suggestions. This paper was written while benefiting from a research grant, which is gratefully acknowledged, granted by the Department of Education and Culture, Ticino Canton, Switzerland, for the preparation of an edition of the inter-war papers and correspondence of Roy Harrod.

² The Commission was asked 'to visit modern University Libraries in Europe and America, to report to the University upon the organization, planning, equipment, and method of administration of such Libraries, and generally to advise the University upon the basis of their investigations as to the best method of securing such library provision at Oxford as shall be abreast of modern requirements' (*Library Provision at Oxford. Report and Recommendations of the Commission Appointed by the Congregation of the University* (Oxford, 1931), p. 7: henceforth abbreviated as *Report and Recommendations*).

³ The grant of up to £5,000 was offered to meet the expenses of a preliminary inquiry and preparing sketches and estimates for such library developments as the University might approve. The documents concerning the Rockefeller Grant are in RF 1.1, series 401, box 61, folders 797–807. (The abbreviation RF indicates documents held at the Rockefeller Archives Centre, in Tarrytown, NY).

⁴ Now housed at Chiba University of Commerce, Ichikawa, Japan. The abbreviation HP indicates papers belonging to this collection.

⁵ Harrod's copies of thirty memoranda are filed in HP VI-27 and VI-28 respectively. The evidence is summarised in Bodleian Library Commission, *Report and Recommendations*, pp. 41–47 and 121–125.

⁶ Harrod's extensive notes on these visits are filed in HP VI-4 (American libraries) and VI-5 (European libraries).

⁷ Bodleian Library Commission, *Report and Recommendations*, pp. 126–133.

⁸ Miers to Harrod, 6 and 10 November 1930 (in HP VI-52 and VI-53). The decision to keep the proceedings secret was taken on 14 March: a copy of the minutes of that meeting is in HP VI-9/2.

⁹ The memoranda were sent out by Sisam attached to a circular letter of 17 November (HP VI-9/19).

¹⁰ A manuscript version is filed in HP VI-10. An extract is in Bodleian Library Commission, *Report and Recommendations*, Appendix to separate Report.

¹¹ Typed document, in HP VI-48.

¹² Typed document, in HP VI-48.

¹³ Draft of the majority report, HP VI-90; Bodleian Library Commission, *Report and Recommendations*, p. 49.

¹⁴ Cited by Harrod in a letter to Miers of 1 December 1930, in HP VI-57/2.

¹⁵ Miers to Harrod, 24 November 1930, in HP VI-55.

¹⁶ Chambers, in a memo on 'The use of central sites' (copy in HP VI-48), challenged Harrod's estimates, suggesting that it would be possible to dig deeper than Harrod had suggested, and to use the space that planning restrictions required be left free above. This would increase the capacity to about 6.16 million books. In Chambers's opinion, this would, in actuality, reduce to 5.5 million books in order to allow for additional exhibition space, etc. Kenyon, in a memo on 'The Capacity of the Bodleian and the Broad St. Sites' (copy in HP VI-48), used the figures of Harrod's estimate, added some extra space, and concluded that Broad Street could accommodate a total of 5.4 million, which would be sufficient—using the rate of growth on which Harrod's estimate was based—for sixty to seventy years.

¹⁷ Harrod to Miers, 26 November, 1 and 6 December, Sisam to Harrod, 27 November, Miers to Harrod, 27 November (in HP VI-56, VI-57/1-2, VI-61, VI-58, VI-59, respectively).

¹⁸ Harrod to Miers, 10 and 14 December 1930; Miers to Harrod, 12 and 16 December; Sisam to Harrod, 16 and 17 December (in HP VI-64, VI-66, VI-65, VI-67, VI-9/23, VI-68/2, respectively).

¹⁹ Veale to Harrod, 16 and 19 December; Sisam to Harrod, 29, 30 and 31 December 1930, 30 and 31 January, 6 February 1931 (in HP VI-91/8, VI-91/9, VI-31/1, VI-32, VI-33, VI/85-86/19, VI-91/10, VI/85-86/20, respectively).

²⁰ Ch. I (the critical part) is filed in HP VI/85-86/1, Ch. II (the constructive part) in HP VI/85-86/4.

²¹ Drafts of the new version are filed in HP VI/85-86/2 (Ch. I), VI/85-86/5-7 (Ch. II) and VI-87.

²² Harrod to Miers, 7 February 1931, in HP VI-80/2.

²³ The Majority report dealt with the question of access to the shelves in a couple of lines: 'we see no reason why the Librarian should not, at his discretion, grant the privilege of direct access to the shelves more freely than has been possible in the past' (Draft of the Majority Report, in HP VI-90. Bodleian Library Commission, *Report and Recommendations*, pp. 59-60).

²⁴ Sisam to Harrod, 19 January and 2 February; Miers to Harrod, 21 and 31 January, 9 February; Harrod to Miers, 30 January, 2 and 11 February 1931 (in HP VI-72, VI-78, VI-74, VI-77, VI-82, VI-76, VI-79, VI-81, respectively).

²⁵ A collection of cuttings is preserved in HP VI-92.

²⁶ H. A. L. Fisher, the Warden of New College, in spite of preferring the Majority report on the whole, acknowledged that this was better for mature researchers, while Harrod's plan better accounted for the needs of seminar research (Fisher to Harrod, 24 March 1931, in HP VI-18).

²⁷ Harrod to A. H. Smith, 16 March 1931, in HP VI-35.

²⁸ J. S. van Sickle to S. M. Gunn, 2 April 1931, enclosing a transcript of two letters from Harrod to Viner dated 25 March 1931, in RF 1.1, Series 401, Box 61, Folder 806.

²⁹ W. W. Bishop to Sisam, 4 April 1931, and Anonymous, 'Précis of a letter dated April 3, 1931, Mr. W. W. Bishop to Mr. Kenneth Sisam. Commission's Report', both in RF 1.1, Series 401R, Box 61, Folder 806.

³⁰ Harrod to Sadler, 1 June 1931, in Bodleian MS. Top. Oxon. c. 633, fol. 101.

³¹ Minutes, memoranda on progress and other documents are in Sadler's papers: Bodleian MS. Top. Oxon. c. 634.