CHAPTER 1

Dr. Sarah Thomas, Vice President for the Harvard Library and University Librarian and Roy E. Larsen Librarian for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Introduction

Dr. Sarah Thomas is no stranger to the academic library community worldwide. In fact, the very idea of this book was inspired by a public lecture, Back to the Future with the Brave New Library, given by Dr. Thomas at the 2015 Dinner in the Library celebration at the University of San Diego Library. In this lecture, Dr. Thomas publicly stated that “We [librarians] are not handmaidens of the researchers.”

Since 2013, Dr. Thomas has been serving as the Vice President for the Harvard Library and University Librarian and the Roy E. Larsen Librarian for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Prior to joining Harvard University, Dr. Thomas served as Bodley’s Librarian and Director of the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford. Previous to Oxford, Dr. Thomas was the Carl A. Kroch University Librarian at Cornell. Former Harvard University Librarian Robert Darnton summed up Sarah Thomas’s achievements and recognitions as follows: “If we conducted a search throughout this world, and far off into the galaxy, where alien librarians may be charting new paths through cyberspace, Sarah Thomas would be at the top of the list.”

In the following interview, edited and condensed from an in-person conversation, Dr. Thomas candidly discusses the rewards and challenges of being Harvard’s library director, as well as her experiences in being the first woman and first non-British citizen to serve as the Librarian at the University of Oxford.

Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself—for instance, your training, educational background, and professional specialties?
My undergraduate degree was in German literature, and I received next a Master of Science in Library Science degree from Simmons [College].\(^1\) Then, I went to graduate school at Johns Hopkins University, where I got an MA and a PhD in German.

For my specialties in librarianship, I would say that would be, originally, cataloging, and then, digital library activities and collaboration.

**Why did you choose to study German Literature?**

My mother’s family was German, though that was not the reason. I grew up in a little mill town (just around 1000 people). When I was 8 years old, there came people into our local elementary school who wanted to teach us German. I think they thought the number of people studying languages like German was falling, and they would capture students at a younger age, when they were more able to learn languages. They were some of the most exotic people that I had ever come into contact with. I liked literature, and it was an opportunity to be transported outside of my little world.

Because I had already worked as a librarian, I was interested in publishing, and so I studied the author—publisher relationship with the idea that although one thinks of the idea of creative genius and literary imagination, in fact, the work that emerges as a published document is a partnership between the publisher and the author. That is what I wrote in my dissertation on Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who was an Austrian poet and dramatist, and his relationship with Anton and Katharina Kippenberg, the publishers of the Insel Verlag.\(^2\)

It may seem far afield from what I am doing now, which is administration, but one question you have asked is “What does having a PhD in German literature contribute to your work?” Of course, one learns to do research when one is writing a dissertation and one learns how to analyze a text and understand its meaning and identify key themes. When writing a dissertation, which is going to be critiqued by others, one has to learn to write clearly. Even if you are writing an email, a report, or even a letter to someone. I find that I can scan through large volumes of text, and that doesn’t bother me. I actually enjoy writing, and that’s one benefit of writing a dissertation. Secondly, my academic work created a common understanding with faculty and graduate students, who are users of academic libraries.

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\(^1\) Simmons College—Homepage. Available at: [http://www.simmons.edu/](http://www.simmons.edu/).

\(^2\) Insel Verlag—Homepage. Available at: [http://www.suhrkamp.de/insel-verlag_67.html](http://www.suhrkamp.de/insel-verlag_67.html).
It’s useful to understand the environment in which they are working. I haven’t continued my scholarship over many years, and I spend most of my time thinking about how things operate, and how you can make something happen more efficiently, rather than focusing on a particular narrow topic. An administrator is very often a generalist; a faculty member achieves success in his or her field often by being able to study something in great depth—I respect that capacity very much.

Why would you choose to be an academic librarian instead of becoming a scholar?

I actually never intended to become a scholar. I said earlier that I started learning German at an early age, and I went to college very close to my home. In American universities, it is an adventure—people go away and they try on new ideas for size. I was kept quite close to home, and so going abroad and living in Europe, which I did when I was 20, was a way to have that kind of exciting adventure and encounter with new ideas. When I was graduating from college, which was in 1970—when you think about the United States at that time, it was during the peak of the antiwar years with the opposition to the Vietnam War. Young women were not always being directed to work. My mother really just wanted me to get married, and I would have a career only as a backup in case something terrible happened to my husband. So, you had two forces at work: one was this tremendous social and political turmoil, and the other was this changing role of gender, and that women began to be able to be educated for law or business or other professions that had been dominated by men.

I finished, and I had no real idea of what I wanted to do. It wasn’t the way people are today, where students climb a ladder toward a particular career with internships and experiences. My ambitions were much more aimless than that. I ended up, by accident, at Harvard University after finishing college. I had an acquaintance who had an apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts [where Harvard is]. I was renting a room there, and I needed a job to pay the rent, and the job I found was in the Harvard Library.

I had previously worked in the library at my undergraduate college, so I had some experience with libraries. Then, I went off to Germany again. After I came back, that is when I decided I would get the library degree, and move into a professional role. At the same time, I was thinking about

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3 Harvard University—Homepage. Available at: [http://www.harvard.edu/](http://www.harvard.edu/).
what kind of librarian I would like to be. I thought that I would like to be a bibliographer—someone who selected German books to add to the collection. I went off to get the Master’s degree because you typically needed that sort of advanced credentials to have a position like that. While I was getting the Master’s degree, I enjoyed the academic environment and decided to stay on and undertake a dissertation.

Did you always work in libraries? Or did you have other careers before becoming a professional librarian?

No, my career has always been that of a librarian.

Did you ever have any second thoughts or regrets during your decades of working in libraries?

Never in my course of life did I ever think of becoming a professor of German literature. But, as a librarian, I have been so fortunate to have had wonderful experiences, and to be associated with so many interesting institutions. I have had a fabulous career as a librarian, so I don’t really have any regrets. Looking at things that I like about libraries, I could have equally gone to business school and had a career in finance or corporate administration.

I have a son who is 29, who works for Audible.com, which markets downloadable books that you can listen to. Audible is owned by Amazon.com. I think, “Wow! If I were starting out today, I’d like to be working for a tech company that reaches into the information world.” I think that it is terribly exciting to think about how one uses the power of the media. A lot of the institutions I have worked in are centuries old—you have all that responsibility and legacy, and it sometimes feels like you can’t be as nimble or inventive as you can be with a start-up or a young organization.

What are these responsibilities that you find can be challenging sometimes?

At Harvard, we have 20 million volumes, and people are invested in the pride that ownership gives them. But, meanwhile, we have the care and feeding of those 20 million volumes. We have to house them and preserve them. They are a treasure, but they are also a big responsibility.

Harvard University Librarian vs Vice President for the Harvard Library—what are the functional differences between these two positions?

There aren’t any real functional differences. University Librarian is the most commonly used title in United States academic research libraries, and Vice President gives me status within the university.
From 2007 to 2013, you served as the library director at the University of Oxford, and you were the first female and first non-British citizen to hold this position. What are the cultural and political implications behind this?

I think it was less important that I was a woman because, by then, the university was hiring many women in senior positions. But, most importantly, the fact that they were willing to hire a non-British citizen meant that we were reaching an era of globalization where Oxford and many other universities are becoming more international in their focus, and if you look at the student body at Oxford, although the undergraduates are primarily British, the graduate students, maybe two-thirds, are international. You want your staff to mirror your student body, and so, having someone from another country was a natural transition for a cosmopolitan university.

**Why do you think it is important to have the staff mirror the student body?**

One wants to have a diverse staff and a diverse student body, because we benefit from the variety of ideas that different people from different cultures, from different backgrounds, bring to this. I don’t think I mentioned earlier that my undergraduate college was a women’s college—it was all women.

Sometimes, I would go to meetings at Smith College (my undergraduate college), and I’d think, “Wow! What’s strange about this?” It is because there are lots of women in prominent leadership positions, whereas if you were 20 years ago in an American university, the faculty was 75% men and the leadership of the university was male. If you aren’t in the majority, you feel excluded or not fully reflected, but if you have a diverse group of people, not only can you find someone who might share your perspective, but you can begin to appreciate the value of the differences that people bring. Where do we get if all people think alike? We might as well be sheep.

**Since there are so many seasoned library directors in Great Britain, why did they choose you instead?**

I think that there are a number of factors at play. One is that in the United Kingdom, there are a limited number of libraries of large size and complexity. Three of the largest are the British Library, Oxford, and Cambridge. But, then, the other university libraries fall off in terms of size or complexity. You might have Imperial College London, which is a

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4 University of Oxford—Homepage. Available at: [http://www.ox.ac.uk/](http://www.ox.ac.uk/).

5 Imperial College London—Homepage. Available at: [http://www.imperial.ac.uk/](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/).
really good university—but it is focused principally on science, so the scope is different. I think that Oxford were looking for someone who could manage a large, complex institution, and who had already done that, rather than someone who was moving up.

Another thing I think they were looking for was someone who had experience in fundraising. British institutions have only lately begun to focus as directly on fundraising as American institutions.

Thirdly, as you get up in scale in these institutions, they have a highly conservative nature. I don’t really mean that in a political sense, but they have survived by preserving and conserving collections, and not taking risks because they are trying to ensure that this precious legacy that they have endures from generation to generation. So, I think they probably looked on me as a “change agent.” I had led a transition from print to digital where I had done experiments with digital publishing.

What were the biggest challenges you faced when you were trying to do fundraising at Oxford [University] or in the United Kingdom context?

Initially, the challenge in fundraising at a new institution is needing to develop relationships with supporters. So, that is just a function of being a newcomer. You do need to understand the cultural context. I can remember meeting with a philanthropist and the executive director of her foundation. We were talking about building a humanities library at Oxford. We discussed it for quite a long time, and she raised some questions that could have been a little critical about it. As we were getting ready to leave, I was thinking, “Gosh, I can’t spend an hour and a half to two hours here and not come away with some sense of whether or not this is going anywhere.” I said to her, “Well, if we did this, this, and this, then you would be willing to entertain a proposal from us?” The other people at the table gasped—it was very direct, and the philanthropist said, “Don’t worry about it. She is an American—they do that!”

When you were trying to modernize the collections at Oxford, what were the challenges that you faced?

Let me talk to you about one project to illustrate this. When I came, the library was in the process of creating a depository (a storage facility), and they were going to move books from a library in the center of town to the edge of town. My colleagues told me not to worry about it—the plans were all done, and they just needed town approval. It turned out to be a very controversial project that the town felt was going to destroy the views of Oxford. Oxford is called the “City of Dreaming Spires,” because there are so many churches, cathedrals, and castle-like buildings there with towers and spires.
When you look down from the hills, you see all these different spires, and it creates a wonderful silhouette, and many people felt that our building was going to be a blemish. Eventually, it was voted down. So we began looking, at my insistence, for a spot maybe an hour outside of Oxford in a more industrial area where there were more warehouses and where there weren’t any cultural landscapes to be in conflict with.

So, we found that spot. But, the staff were worried—they wanted the books very close to them because they said when they called for them, they didn’t want for them to be two hours on the road, they wanted it to be 20 minutes away. I said, “Yes, but you separate the low-use from the high-use books. You keep the high-use books in the center of Oxford and your low-use books can be sent to the depository.” They said, “Well, you can’t do that.” Then I said, “Why can’t you?” Well, it turned out that there was a Bodley’s Librarian named Edward Nicholson, and he had been head of the Bodleian from 1882 to 1912. More than 100 years ago, Nicholson had invented a classification for the books. This classification kept books by size, and so they thought it was very efficient, and they just wanted to pick up and move all of the books the way they had been classed.

I said, “No, we have to barcode all of the books, and we have to analyze their use.” They said that if we barcode the books, then it will cost millions of pounds. In the end, we devised a very efficient strategy to barcode inexpensively and quickly, and we were able to transform our service, placing high-demand materials on open-access shelving and low-use materials in high-density storage.

I want to return to Nicholson. He created a classification, and he taught it to a staff member. That man worked for the Bodleian Library for 40 years. During his career there, he taught the classification to another man, and that person worked at the library for, I think, 47 years. By the time I came, it was like your grandfather had a holy law that could not be violated. It was hard for anyone except an outsider to imagine books could be ordered differently.

So the time it took you to convince them was longer than the time to actually implement those changes?

Yes. I often find that this is true, though, in libraries and in other jobs, you often know what you should do—the issue is not knowing what to do, but it is bringing other people to understand the possibilities.

Under your leadership, the Bodleian Library was awarded the Queen’s Anniversary Prize for excellence in collections. Based on that criterion, why did the committee select your library to receive this award?
It was more than the library—it was the library, museums, and botanic
garden of Oxford. I authored the proposal for consideration by the
reviewing committee. The cultural institutions of Oxford had distin-
guished collections, but the award recognized the efforts made to democ-
ratize access to them, to share them with the public, and to widen access
by having programs for schoolchildren and other groups.

*American library professionals vs British library professionals—how are the atti-
tudes and working styles different?*

Actually, I find them very similar. There are some librarians from
English universities who come over to head American institutions. I found
the research librarians in the United Kingdom to be a very congenial and
knowledgeable group. We cared about the same issues: open access, user
services, assessment, you name it.

*Could you give a brief introduction to the services at the Harvard Library?*

The Harvard Library is a federation of a number of different libraries
at Harvard that specialize in different disciplines. It is very large—over
700 staff—so it is the largest in the United States for academic research
libraries. The collections are huge, the budget is large ($175 million), and
it is a library whose mission is to collect and preserve information, and
make it accessible to the people for advancing knowledge.

*What are the highlights of the collections and services of the Harvard Library?*

We have excellent collections in foreign language materials. We have
the Harvard—Yenching Library, for example, which has many rare
Chinese materials which we have been digitizing and making freely avail-
able. We have an outstanding Middle Eastern and Latin American collec-
tion. If you name any geographical region, then Harvard will surely have
outstanding collections in that area. We are very strong in 19th-century
American literature—so, a poet like Emily Dickinson or Ralph Waldo
Emerson the essayist. We have over 1 million maps, and we have 10 mil-
lion photographs. The scale is so large that it is hard to focus on just one
area, because there are just so many areas. It is like a whole mountain
range of collections as opposed to a single peak.

*Can you describe the staffing structure at Harvard Library?*

We have a library leadership team. Harvard is made up of many
schools (Business, Design, Dental, Medicine, Divinity, Education,
Engineering and Applied Sciences, Harvard College, Government, Law,

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6 Harvard—Yenching Library—Homepage. Available at: [https://library.harvard.edu/librar-
ies/yenching](https://library.harvard.edu/libraries/yenching).
Faculty of Arts & Sciences, Medical, and Public Health). The schools have a library or, in some cases, several libraries. There is a representational model where the director of each school’s library sits on the library leadership team. Then, we have something called Shared Services, which would be Access Services, Information and Technical Services, and Preservation, Conservation, and Digital Imaging Services. These Shared Services provide an integrated service in support of all of the school libraries.

*Can you describe your typical day at work?*

A typical day at work is many, many meetings. We are planning a symposium on collections: what is happening in the development of collections in the 21st century? One of my staff members is leaving, so I am meeting to think about how to organize responsibility for her area when she is gone. We are renovating the Science Library, so I spend time with the architects viewing the furniture, the fabrics, and materials that they will use in that library. I met with the Chief Information Officer (the chief IT person) of the university and talked about the library’s priorities for the coming year. Then, I had a meeting about the budget, and then I had lunch with one of the heads of our libraries. So, that is a fairly typical day. I use meetings a lot as a way of incorporating a lot of diverse viewpoints into the formulation of policy and strategy.

*Can you describe your leadership and management style, and your views toward the impact of modern technologies on the management services?*

I guess I would say my management style is that I try to be highly collaborative, where I rely on people to share their views and then to forge a unified consensus about a strategy. I think that the value of technology is high if it becomes not like a “goddess” to which you pray.

I heard someone as I was driving home the other day when I was listening to the radio. He was talking about transition in the workforce. He said that in 20 years there will be two kinds of jobs in the world: there will be jobs for people who tell computers what to do, and there will be jobs where the computer tells you what to do. He was talking about if you have self-driving cars and lorries, you won’t even need a truck driver anymore. Today a truck driver is someone who can get a high-paying job without much education. But, those jobs are going to go away and more and more of the laboring classes’ jobs—they are going to be replaced with automation.

What you want to do as a library director is to tell computers what you want them to do. You don’t want them telling you what to do. You
also want to educate people who are making decisions, writing the algorithms, thinking about what’s ethical to do—that’s what I think we should be using technology for in libraries. It helps us do our jobs better—not do it blindly, but do it thoughtfully.

In addition to libraries, an increasing number of arts, educational, and cultural institutions in Europe (especially in the United Kingdom) are looking up to the American model for change in many respects, including marketing, outreach, fundraising, and leadership, especially for innovation. Why do you think that this is the case, and to what do you attribute the success of the American model of management?

As I said to you earlier, I think that those differences are narrowing, so I wouldn’t put it as sharply between the United Kingdom and the United States. These commercial companies are, of course, interested in marketing their product, and they are interested in profit. But, meanwhile, look at me. I am sitting on 20 million books, and their use is declining. I should be marketing those—I should find some way, not to monetize them, but to make them visible and more accessible and used and more valuable. We live in a world in which authority isn’t everything and where participation and cultural activity is extremely important. We need to rethink, and I think one advantage of American management is probably that they are more open to allowing users to define what the service is. All the time, we talk about our search strategy in our systems, and people want to have all sorts of features in it. But, meanwhile, the users just go to Google, and they are happy with it. Either we need to do a good job on selling them why our system would be better, why it would yield more relevant results, or we should say, “No, we are the ones who are trying to make them take this bitter medicine, and they don’t want it.” We need to make adjustments to ensure that what we steward is valued and used.

Cornell University vs Oxford vs Harvard: the overall attitudes and expectations toward library services among the elite universities—are they different or similar in many ways?

Well, they are different, and that is because Harvard is in a larger metropolitan area, Cornell is in a rural area, and Oxford is in a smaller city in the southern part of England. It is surprising how much that makes a difference. But, for example, at Harvard, there are thousands (probably hundreds of thousands) of visitors who want to come into Widener Library, but there are so many of them that they can’t all be accommodated.
When I was at Cornell, if anyone had the persistence to make it up the hill and find parking, we were able to let them all in. There weren’t that many people, so our doors were open. Those are kind of silly things to point out—I think that all of the librarians I have worked with and all of the academics and students have all been serious and with a purpose; they respect learning, they love their library, and they care a lot about their library. So, there’s a kind of unity across those institutions.

We noticed the Digital Repository Service (DRS) at Harvard University. How do you anticipate that that would contribute to the learning and research for the Arts and Sciences faculties and also the scholarly community worldwide?

The DRS, as we call it, is a repository to preserve our digital holdings. What it does for research and learning is to create in the digital age the same kind of commitment to longevity and to the enduring persistence of knowledge.

What part of your job do you find the most rewarding and which part of your job do you find to be frustrating?

The best part about my job is all the people I get to meet, all the opportunities I have to encounter people who have different ideas, have great knowledge, and who enjoy sharing it. That is a very special aspect for me.

What is frustrating is that you have a good idea that seems obvious to you, but you have to patiently tell people about it multiple times.

Would you like to say something inspiring to conclude this interview?

You are interviewing a lot of librarians who have been leaders, and I think that being a librarian, whether it is in a traditional sense that we have been, or whether it is a new information specialist, is a wonderful job. When I went to the college for women, we lived in small groups of about 80 young women. Three of us went on to head major research libraries. We were being interviewed, and one said, “I went into librarianship because it was a profession in which I would never have to apologize for what I was doing.” She felt it had a kind of moral compass or integrity to it. If you were a banker or a politician, then maybe you would be exposed to forces that led you to make choices that were not beneficial for mankind. But, she felt that we, as librarians, were always carrying that torch of virtue. I have thought about that many times. Being a librarian is a profession in which one does much good for individuals and society.
Dr. Sarah Thomas.

Widener Library, Harvard University.
Lamont Library, Harvard University.