

GRETCHEN WALSH: A TRIBUTE

Gretchen Walsh, head of the African Studies Library at Boston University, died unexpectedly on June 10th 2007 at the age of 65. She was a formidable force in Africana librarianship. Her colleague David Westley provides the following tribute and John McIlwaine adds a few lines on behalf of Gretchen's friends in SCOLMA.

Gretchen was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania and was educated at Muhlenberg College and the University of Pittsburgh where she graduated. Soon afterward she married Ivan Dihoff and the two of them moved to Nigeria first to Ibadan and later to Katsina where they both taught. Sometime in between or later they taught English in Barcelona for several years. They had two children, Ayo and Tanya. Then they moved to the University of Wisconsin at Madison where Ivan studied linguistics and Gretchen began studying anthropology. Around this time she published her first book, *Katsina: Profile of a Nigerian City* (Praeger, 1970). After their divorce Gretchen got a certificate in African Studies and a Masters degree in Library Science. In library school she met Dan Walsh to whom she was married for over thirty years. Together they moved to the University of California at Irvine where they both worked as librarians. In 1976 she became head of the African Studies Library at B.U., a position she held until her death.

It is difficult to assess her stellar career. She steered the library into the information age with a steady hand but she was disturbed by the many abuses of modern technology of which she perceived many library users were guilty. She moved the collection towards international status but with a limited budget. She was cynical of the skills that most undergraduates brought to the library but she was unstinting in the creative uses of reference work going beyond simple formulations. Her knowledge of reference sources was encyclopedic. When she was on the vacation from which she never returned I vowed to ask her when she returned what her secret was. I'll never know the specific answers I might have gleaned but fortunately Gretchen has left behind numerous writings which answer many of these questions. One of these essays, ' "Can we Get There from Here?" Negotiating the Washouts, Cave-Ins, Dead Ends, and Other Hazards on the Road to Research on Africa,' appeared in an issue of *The Reference Librarian* (87-88, 2004) and was republished as a book edited by Deborah LaFond and Gretchen, *Research, Reference Service and Resources for the Study of Africa* (Haworth, 2004). This is a boon not only to the non-specialist but to specialists like myself who can always use a concise summary of the topic. Another such article is 'Library Instruction and Reference for Undergraduates: Opening a Faculty-Library Partnership' in Victoria K. Evals and David Henige, eds. *African Librarianship in an Era of Change* (Scarecrow, 2005) which serves a similar role. She had many other publications, one of which should not go unmentioned - her *The Media in*

Africa and Africa in the Media: An Annotated Bibliography (Zell, 1996). Her real skills however lay in the daily hands-on work of educating students, faculty and fellow staff in the never-ending search for the truth in African Studies. She had a warmth especially towards undergraduates, a sharp eye for errors of prose, fact and interpretation as well as a contagious sense of humour.

She had planned to retire next year and looked forward to moving somewhere in the western states. Twice annually since 1994 she and Dan spent their vacations in the Sierra Nevada of California or in Utah where they enjoyed rafting down the Colorado and Green rivers. It was on such a trip that she was struck by an aortic aneurism. So she was planning to leave the field soon anyway but how sad to be denied the reward she so richly deserved for a life dedicated to librarianship. We are now feeling the loss of someone who above all was engaged.

David Westley

Acting Head, African Studies Library, Boston University

I only met Gretchen Walsh the once, at the 40th anniversary conference of the ALC, but as with many of my fellow Africanist colleagues in the U.K., I already felt I had known her for years through her frequent and stimulating contributions to the professional literature both printed and electronic. Although enormously knowledgeable she never pretended to be omniscient, and was always prepared to welcome the new, provided it passed her rigorous standards of accuracy, accessibility and genuine usefulness. Equally she was unsparing in her criticisms of sloppy and redundant publications, and we all looked forward to her reviews of reference works, especially in *Choice*. We are fortunate that she distilled 30 years of her views on using and compiling African reference works into the masterly exposition in the *Reference librarian*, 2004, identified by David Westley above. In my *Africa: a guide to reference material*, 2nd ed. (Lochcarron, Zell, 2007) I welcomed this paper as one of the outstanding contributions to the literature on African reference sources being "trenchant, witty, wide-ranging, vastly informed and unsparing of any thoughtlessness and carelessness by any of those concerned". No better contributor could have been found to launch the new column "The Curmudgeon's corner" in the *Africana librarians newsletter*, in 2006 where she considered Wikipedia and typically after concluding "there is no need for Wikipedia" went on realistically to say "since it's already there ... we can't get rid of it; we can work to make it better".

John McIlwaine

A review of *Research, reference service and resources for the study of Africa* will appear in the next issue of ARD.