

Action Jackson

Writer • Teacher • Traveler

BY TOMMY NEWTON

Dr. Carlton Jackson pauses in front of Western Kentucky University's Cherry Hall, where he teaches most of his classes.

PHOTO BY SHEVIL HAGAN-BOOTH

AFTER 40 YEARS AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, CARLTON JACKSON STILL THINKS HE HAS THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD. "I LIKE TO TEACH. I LIKE TO WRITE. I LIKE TO TRAVEL," HE SAID. "I DON'T KNOW OF ANY OTHER PROFESSION THAT WOULD ALLOW ME TO DO THAT."

As an educator, he's taught U.S. social history to students at Western and at about a dozen other schools in the United States and abroad. As an author, he's written or edited about 20 books and numerous scholarly publications. As a traveler, he's been to about 50 countries and to every state except Alaska, and he's been a Fulbright scholar in four countries. "I've had a good career," Jackson said. "There is no better job in the world than to be a full professor, tenured at an accredited institution."

Even though he's taking optional retirement this year, that doesn't mean the 68-year-old Alabama native is slowing down. "I have no desire to get into any field that doesn't have something to do with teaching or writing," he said.

Jackson plans to teach history courses at Western this fall and plans to continue his writing/research projects. "This has been my life for 43 years and I don't see anything changing anytime soon," he said.

Jackson the Writer

In many ways, Jackson still considers himself a journalist. "A good historian is a reporter as well as an analyst. I just simply think history lends itself to some kind of reporting and then a mixture of reporting and interpretation."

After serving in the U.S. Air Force from 1951 to 1954, Jackson returned to Birmingham, Alabama, near his Blount County home. He worked for the *Birmingham Post-Herald* as a reporter and

photographer. "If I have any talent for writing, I got it in on the job training," Jackson said.

He still tries to write as a newspaperman and is pleased when book reviewers note his journalistic style. "To me, that is a great compliment because it means people can read what it is that I have written," Jackson said. "I don't indulge in academic gobbledygook or jargon that seems prevalent in this pro-

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fession. People feel they have to use words that common, ordinary citizens don't have any inkling of what they're talking about. If you can't reach your reader, there's hardly any point in writing in the first place. That's my philosophy of writing." That philosophy has served him well.

Last year, his book on a Holocaust survivor, *Joseph Gavi: Young Hero of the Minsk Ghetto*, was well received. His latest project is a biography of Genora Johnson Dollinger who played a leading role in sit-down strikes in Flint, Michigan, automobile plants in the late 1930s.

His other books include *Forgotten Tragedy: The Sinking of HMT Rohna*; *Hattie: A Life of Hattie McDaniel*; *Picking Up the Tab: The Life and Movies of Martin Ritt*; *Who Will Take Our Children: The Story of the British Evacuation, 1939-45*;

Hounds of the Road; and *The Dreadful Month*.

Jackson is always looking for ideas and topics. "I get ideas from numerous sources. One of the best is the newspaper." That's where he got the ideas for books on Joseph Gavi and the HMT Rohna.

He began researching his book on Hattie McDaniel after watching *Gone with the Wind*. McDaniel was the first African-American to win an Oscar as Best Supporting Actress for her role in that film.

Who Will Take Our Children began during Jackson's travels to his wife's hometown in England. Several village residents had left London during the



German blitzkrieg of World War II and asked Jackson to write about their stories.

Jackson, the son of a coal miner, wrote *The Dreadful Month* after reading a story about a December 1907 mine disaster in Monongah, West Virginia.

Once he chooses a topic, Jackson gets to work gathering information, contacting sources, visiting libraries or archives and keeping detailed notes. In what he describes as a "weird method," Jackson compiles his notes on a regular sheet of paper. He numbers and identifies each note so he can easily find the material pertinent to whatever chapter or section he is writing.

The book he wrote about Genora Dollinger had 2,000 full-page notes that translated into a finished product of about 74,000 words. "I rarely have a

book under 60,000 words," he said.

Jackson usually completes the project before he looks for a publisher. "If I don't believe in a topic, I won't write about it," he said. "You have to believe in it to make it worthwhile. If you believe in it, you can get an editor interested in it."

Jackson's style also includes limiting himself to writing two hours per day, beginning in the late morning. "If I can have a cup of coffee and a bite to eat when I get up, then go in and start working, I think that's ideal," Jackson said.

Over the years, Jackson has found that getting started writing each day is one obstacle. "So one thing I do when I quit writing for the day is I try to end right in the middle of a sentence," he said. "I don't finish the sentence so that next day when I turn on my computer my first question to myself will be why did I leave this sentence incomplete. And then I will complete that sentence and it will encourage me to write the next one. I find it a tool to get started every day."

Jackson the Teacher

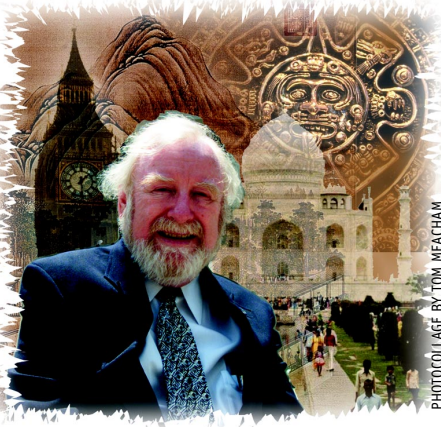
In many ways, Jackson's education career developed like those sentences he tries to complete. "I did not particularly plan on going into history or being a history major," he said. "I had a chance to stay on at the Birmingham paper. I could have stayed in the Air Force. Or I could be a teacher. I'm very pleased I had choices. I didn't have to go into anything."

His entry into the history profession began in psychology. While he was in the Air Force, Jackson took advantage of a University of Maryland program that allowed servicemen to take courses. He was stationed near Oxford University in England and took a couple of psychology courses. "I think psychology and history go hand in hand," he said, noting that many of his books deal with social and cultural subjects.

After he left the Air Force, Jackson

said his family encouraged him to consider history because of his love for reading. "If you're going to be a history major, you've got to read. You can't be a history major if you don't like to read." Even today, Jackson tries to average reading 100 pages of material each day. "I think a key to being a good

JACKSON'S OVERSEAS TRAVELS TO ABOUT 45 COUNTRIES INCLUDE FOUR FULBRIGHT AWARDS TO TEACH IN INDIA, PAKISTAN, BANGLADESH, AND FINLAND, AND TEACHING VISITS TO CENTRAL AMERICA, CHINA, IRAN, AND AUSTRIA.



writer is being a good reader," he said.

Jackson earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Birmingham Southern in 1957 and 1959 and his doctorate from Georgia in 1963. He taught at Birmingham University School, Montevallo University and the University of Georgia before coming to Western in 1961.

When he arrived on the Hill, Jackson didn't expect to stay long. "I was going to stay for two years at most and go back to newspapering," he said. But the history department position gave

him the opportunity to teach, write, and travel, and the opportunity to work beside some of Western's most respected historians and authors, including Lowell Harrison, Marion Lucas, and others.

His two-year plan turned into a 40-year stay. Along the way, as he was teaching, writing and traveling, Jackson received numerous academic awards and honors, including being named Western's first University Distinguished Professor in 1996.

"I have a great number of people here that I respect very much," Jackson said. "I happen to be in what has traditionally been a very good department."

Jackson the Traveler

In many ways, Jackson's career in the history department enhanced his love of writing and traveling. "I like to get out and see other parts of the world," he said.

Jackson's overseas travels to about 45 countries include four Fulbright awards to teach in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Finland, and teaching visits to Central America, China, Iran, and Austria. He's never been to Africa or Australia but hopes to visit those continents during his retirement years.

Jackson's wife, the former Patricia Ann Dow, is a native of England so Jackson the writer/traveler looks for any project that will get him back to London, his favorite city. Visiting their children also requires some world traveling with one son in South Korea, one son in California, and two daughters in Florida.

"I've had a varied career all having to do with teaching, research, writing, and public service," he said. "That's what we're supposed to do in this field."

As a writer, teacher, and traveler, Jackson looks back with pride on his varied career, but he looks forward to new opportunities to teach, new places to travel, and new books to write. "When I was a student, I used to think everything had been written about that could possibly be written about," Jackson said. "Boy, was I wrong."