

Steele's saga

International conferences, British libraries and the Quest for the Holy Grail

Stirred at the news of Eric Wainwright's *Odyssey*, Colin Steele, another intrepid traveller, has sent us his own saga. That the Second International Conference on Interlending and Document Supply and the 14th International OnLine Conference were held in London on 19-21 November and 11-13 December respectively. At the former, Colin delivered a paper 'Document Delivery and Australia's Distributed National Collection' (Proceedings to be published by the British Library Document Supply Centre later this year) and at the latter one on 'Australian Automation Developments 1989-90' (Proceedings edited by David Raitt. Oxford: Learned Information 1990).

Both Conferences were well attended by delegates from many nations. At the Interlending Conference 27 countries were represented and at the OnLine Conference, with a higher delegate registration, there was a very strong European contingent, notably from Scandinavia, the Netherlands and France. This European dimension is, of course, one that is not easily accessible in Australia, but it is clear that the developments in Europe on document delivery, e.g. with Project for Integrated Catalogue Automation (PICA) in the Netherlands and the National Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (INIST) in France, will bear close scrutiny.

English, fortunately, remains the 'lingua franca' of European conferences but the ability of professionals from European countries to be fluent in several languages is a reminder to Australia of our limited abilities in foreign languages — and in our context Asia is particularly relevant here. Such conferences also reaffirm that smoking, particularly by delegates from the Latin countries, is much more prevalent in Europe than in Australia!

The Document Supply Conference had relatively few papers at the 'cutting edge' of the E-(electronic) Library developments, such as are emanating from the Memex Research Institute in Southern California (MEMRI), the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries (CARL), and the Research Libraries Group (RLG) in Stanford. Professor Keith Clayton, Chair of the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC) Advisory Committee,

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indicated how frustrated he was at the increased cost of science serials (aren't we all!), but that he was limited in the number of items he could request at the University of East Anglia and 'whilst the item may be sent from Boston Spa, only personal attendance and collection can extract a book from within the library'.

Graham Cornish outlined the financial barriers to effective international interlending and advocated a voucher scheme based

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on Australia's successful practice! Dr Maurice Line, then President of the UK Library Association, in a panel

discussion with Colin Steele and Carrol Lunau, Senior Policy Advisor (Systems and Analysis) at the National Library of Canada, indicated that pursuing conspectus was like the 'search for the holy grail'. As the late Dr Brian Enright has said the holy grail disappeared 'when approached by anyone not of perfect purity'. That may be the problem here? Speakers from the UK, USA and Canada revealed that conspectus, while useful for individual libraries, had yet to provide a platform for significant cooperation between libraries.

We may be 'down under' from Europe, but we're far from down!

The OnLine Conference, in contrast to the Document Supply Conference, was heavily attended by the special and business library and information sector. Academic librarians were few and far between which perhaps represents the relative backwardness of these libraries in IT delivery and the lack of funds to attend — although since speakers were given free registration, etc. this could have been overcome easily by librarians in the UK. One high point for Colin was the exhilaration of those attending the conference from Eastern Europe. Colin chaired a session on 'Networks and Gateways' which included a Hungarian and a Russian speaker, the latter from the Soviet Space Mission Control Centre. Their joy at being able to present papers and to be able to contribute internationally underlined what a force they will be in the 1990s in the library and information debate. However, lack of funds will prevent many projects advancing initially to current state-of-the-art technology. Several speakers from South Africa presented papers which will encourage more interchanges with that country once the sanctions issues have been resolved following the cessation of apartheid.

Perhaps of most long-term importance at the OnLine Conferences were the excellent papers on electronic copyright. Karen Hunter, Vice-

President of Elsevier Science, highlighted the 'tensions and ironies' in the debate, particularly in the context of copyright remuneration. Victor Rosenberg, of Personal Bibliographic Software of Ann Arbor in the USA, felt that total policing of the electronic jungle was impossible since 'technology will be used regardless of legal sanctions'.

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Therefore, 'in pricing, vendors will have to price their products to account for the material that is stolen'. Like supermarkets 'legitimate users will pay for the thieves'. The law suits that are filed will be 'by the large companies with large legal war chests' who establish legal precedent and act as an overall deterrent.

Other impressions of the conferences and British libraries must be fleeting because of space restrictions. They include sadness at the death in November of Dr Brian Enright, Librarian of Newcastle University, whose British Library study *Selection for Survival* tackled such relevant issues as 'life cycle costings' for libraries and whose wit quoted earlier was legendary: he once described Pro-Vice Chancellors as 'mice training to be rats' and the occupational disease of cataloguers to be 'listitis'. The ludicrousness of the UK binary divide in library terms (but without advocating here the underfunding and political horse-trading of the Australian amalgamations) was obvious with polytechnic libraries in steady state yet libraries of small universities (yes they do still exist Mr Dawkins!) were pursuing long term research collecting aims.

The mounting of ISI databases at a computer at Bath University to allow national terminal access (based on cooperative sharing of ISI subscriptions by 35 academic libraries) to ISI data and document delivery is something that will be considered in Australia. The financial losses of a number of British universities, notably Bristol and Edinburgh, impinged on library operations and contrasted with the

professional fund-raising of the Bodleian Library (over £5.7 million in 3 years) although at the cost of much senior staff time.

Two key books released in late 1990 were the British Library's R & D report *Information UK — 2000* ed. J Martyn (Bowker-Saur) with its multi-author vision of a digital access future and the King Research team's extensive and excellent manual on performance indicators *Keys to Success* (London: HMSO) which picks up much of what José-Marie Griffiths was saying in Australia last September.

Overall a general 'backwardness' of British academic libraries compared to their Australian counterparts was apparent. However, not many wanted to know about Australian libraries and information resources unless they had visited, like Maurice Line, or Philip Bryant at the Centre for Bibliographic Management at Bath, or Geoffrey Ford at Bristol University Library. This parochialism is similar to the situation Jenny Stocks found at the American OnLine/CD-ROM Conference in Washington in November 1990 (Lasie 21/3).

The end result if one had specifically wanted to visit British academic libraries to learn of major technological issues, other than how to cope with cuts, would have been disappointment. Better to read the excellent set of papers by Maurice Line given from a 1989 British Council course (M Line ed. *Academic Library Management*. London, Library Association 1990).

If Professor Ross, Chair of the Higher Education Review of Libraries, believes librarians are at fault politically because they only speak to each other, and then in a curious form of 'libspeak', maybe we can speak to others! Australian libraries might be able to market similar courses here in this region to illustrate our undoubted developments and achievements in ways similar to the very successful British Council marketing exercises for overseas librarians. How about it ALIA, AIMA/NLA, etc.? We may be 'down under' from Europe, but we're far from down!

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