

INTERNATIONAL LIBRARIANSHIP

- Attending professional development and networking events has been surprising as I found that a lot of the issues and feelings that would be bought up on ALIA e-lists/at ALIA Victoria meetings or at the NLS were very similar here.
- Temporary work has almost disappeared in the current market.
- If you work in the legal field, many local library associations and library schools offer law librarianship training in US law as either seminars or by studying a few subjects. Although, for many positions, a law degree or Juris Doctor are required.
- Searching Craigslist for a job can be a huge time waster...but could also land you a dream job! Nevertheless be forewarned. I am comfortable stating that many, if not most, of the job listings on Craigslist are fraudulent.
- A willingness to move for a job should be seriously considered. While the siren song of the American Big City experience may be luring you here, it may be advantageous to forestall these dreams and spend a year or two in a regional area to get US experience on your CV.
- Learn how Americans expect their job applications. I did not apply for one position that expected key selection criteria to be addressed as is traditionally done in Australia and changed my resume completely to a format appropriate for the US market.
- Expect to provide a detailed explanation of your qualifications – especially if you worked in a government department in Australia. Be prepared to describe what that work involved and what the department actually is.

- Public libraries are struggling for funding and dealing with massive cutbacks in the US. In order to earn a living wage in New York City, I could not consider a job in one. If I was in a regional area, this would be a different story.

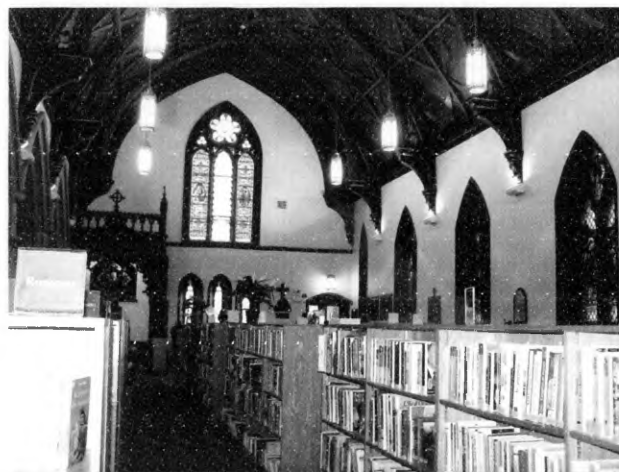
In the end I opted to look outside the traditional library environment that I was accustomed to and was extremely fortunate to find employment at the American Australian Association as Technology Associate. I monitor and maintain the membership database, the website/content management system, and provide general IT assistance. There are days where I still long for the library environment that I called "home" for so long (and yes, I do miss reference requests!), but in times like these, when I work one block from Wall Street and can see firsthand the effect that the economic crisis has had on the American workplace, it is a blessing to be employed. Another bonus? Being able to work in an environment where there are always Tim Tams in the fridge!

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Librairie ou bibliothèque?

Supported by a phrase book and an inadequate memory of high school French, it was going to be interesting to try to locate and navigate libraries in Canada and France. What would be different, what would be the same in the very small sample that I visited?

In Quebec, the task was made easier by the hospitality and patience of colleagues at the IFLA Congress in August 2008. The first library I visited was a well-signposted branch public library a block or so away from the Congress centre, in a deconsecrated church complete with graveyard. Inside, the Bibliothèque Saint Jean Baptiste is easier to recognise with low shelving, children's area, reading tables, and a bank of internet PCs receiving a pretty good work out from members and itinerants such as the IFLA delegates. The collections looked fresh, if somewhat uniform due to standardised processing, the staff friendly and skilled in identifying the verbally challenged like me before they opened their mouths to unwittingly mangle French.



Bibliothèque Quebec

Next stop the Montreal bus trip. This meant that I could see some of the Quebec countryside and enjoy the company of librarians from national, state, and university libraries in Europe and North America. The BANQ tour comprised the state library of Quebec and the main archives building. The archives are housed in an aggregated building which brings together a former mansion, a former technical college, and a modern extension that links it all together with an exhibition space, cafeteria, and offices.

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The Archives library, which is open to the public, had been renovated to reflect the original features of the technical college library and contained Art Nouveau inspired furniture and an impressive spiral staircase. It came as no surprise to find out that their most heavy users were family historians. As Quebec celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2008, there had been a resurgence of interest in personal and local histories.

The other part of the tour was to the Grande Bibliothèque which was experiencing record-breaking visitation. It has the functions of a national library, a large metropolitan public library, and a developed virtual cultural space (<http://www.banq.qc.ca>). And it was very busy. Arrive by bus, car, or via its own stop on the Metro and enter from one of three glass elevators. Informal seating and study desks stretch along the outside corridors, banks of PCs are available for the virtual collections, and a rather strange tiered area provides powered spaces for visitors to use their own laptops. The important collection of state significance has its own secure space. The general reference collection is housed behind a wooden slatted wall which looks beautiful but rather intimidating.



Bibliothèque nationale de France

Left to my own devices, I did frequently step into a “librairie” after forgetting that it was a bookshop. By trip number two, I had that right!

In Paris, on foot, on holiday, but still ready to check out a couple of bibliothèques, but first a side excursion to the Bibliothèque Municipale de Sartene, Corsica. It is in what looks like a very ordinary, modern residential block and filled with a recognisably public library collection. Full marks go to the librarian on duty for her friendliness. We exchanged library merchandise and I particularly liked the slogan on the bookmark: “On trouve toujours un livre à croquer” (Google translates this as “you can always find a book to munch”).

The Bibliothèque nationale de France site Francois-Mitterrand is located quite a long stroll from the tourist areas along the Seine and in an unattractive part of Paris. The first challenge was finding the entrance. The next was the security check going in. The third was negotiating the rooms thematically arranged around a corridor which overlooked a forest in the centre of the building. This was another foreign space as I was used to large open areas in our national libraries. I had the impression that there was some serious study being done in those rooms. The foyer was less intimidating and more familiar as it had a directory, online catalogues (more

keyboard and language challenges there!), and a crowded lounge with newspapers and current issue periodicals. I pretended that I knew what I was doing but I suspect that the act was unconvincing to a largely disinterested public.

My final sortie was into a public library, with another uninspiring entrance, on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. I found this inadvertently after a late lunch and thought I might check my email. This place was almost as packed as McDonald’s and felt much more like home. Like Quebec, the collection appears to have standardised processing and the fiction is arranged by genre. After a quick browse through the well-stocked discothèque (music on CD, no dancing) and a bit of help from a patron with the keyboard layout, I left following a mother and a couple of excited children chattering about their reading choices.

Despite my poor language skills, I could still recognise libraries and make some use of them. However, my experience did emphasise how disconcerting our libraries can be to visitors and new members whose English skills are basic. I certainly have a heightened appreciation of library staff who constantly deal with users from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It also made me think about looking at your own library as a visitor. Can you find the entrance and what do you see when you arrive inside?

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Serendipitous stories

I have been fortunate to have travelled overseas twice in the past two years and on each occasion I made time to visit libraries and colleagues. Travelling opened my eyes to many fascinating places, but I benefitted most when I conversed and compared our Australian experiences with colleagues.

After presenting at a conference in York (UK) I met a former Melbourne colleague who was keen to talk about life in Australia. This was mutually beneficial as she was able to give me local travel advice. I visited the public and Minster libraries and talked to the reference librarians. Then I travelled to the university and met a colleague from Brisbane who had been seconded to York. We talked as we toured through the campus and library.



York Minster Library

In Oxford I met the representative who handles Australian accounts. She toured me through Oxford University Press then to the library and museum. By chance, the archivist was there and he guided us through the exhibits. He spoke with such reverence I felt them come alive. There were wooden cradles with original letter blocks. The archivist demonstrated techniques using various tools which, in themselves, were works of art.

Some of the original etched plates for the OUP annual calendars were there as well as one made as a special gift for Her Most