

Unwrapping Crocodiles

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Law Librarianship

As we all know, Moses was the first law librarian, though he was a clumsy butter-fingered librarian who broke the only books put in his care in a fit of bad temper because someone had been turning down the corners of the pages – no that can't be right. Anyway, it is well known that early forms of law librarian had a wide range of duties, walking up mountains, speaking directly with God, social reform, and they also had a tendency to get annoyed if people did not read the tablets of stone in their collections. Those of us who started our careers in librarianship in more recent times did not have the advantage of mentors of quite such stature or the benefit of such a moral imperative in our work but, on the other hand, we have a deeper appreciation of conservation issues¹. There may even be a qualification in law librarianship given another millennium, if we put our minds to it.

Moses was, of course, more concerned with access rather than holdings which places him firmly at the leading edge of recent debate. He is also dead, but death is less of a disadvantage in the transmission of knowledge than one may think, as we shall learn later. After all, many of the people with whom we deal are dead but their knowledge is recorded.

By 1949, the duties of a law librarian could be more mundane as this passage from an academic lawyer acting as strenuous advocate for the law library indicates:

As soon as it is discovered that he has any time for anything except unpacking books, shelving them, checking booksellers' catalogues and the like, something is done about it. He will be asked to read proofs, check citations, assist the janitor, and walk Professor Jones' dog.²

In that article Professor Edward Bade chronicles the requirements of the American Association of Law Schools with regard to law libraries and law librarians and tells us that, at the time, "One is left with the feeling that our deans and faculties have considered the requirement for a library as purely technical, and that anyone who knows the alphabet and can count at least to three hundred is qualified to be a law librarian"³. He continues, "It is my contention that next to the dean, the law librarian is the most important member of any law faculty. The only reason the dean is more important is that he usually selects the librarian."⁴ It may be, however, that my own perceptions of librarianship have been shaped as much by other reading, for example Jorge Luis Borges (librarian and labyrinth)⁵ or Terry Pratchett (librarian as orang-utan)⁶, as by library and information science literature.

Classical Studies

When I was young I wanted to be an archaeologist and later I wanted to be a librarian. I didn't get to be an archaeologist, even after I could spell it, but I got close (we are getting to the crocodiles).

My first library job was a one-year graduate trainee contract under the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries scheme at the Institute of Classical Studies Library in London. This is a world-class research library. It now has a wholly online catalogue. However, at the time, the catalogue was entirely in book form. The twenty or so books were massive and weighty, two-foot square binders with metal spines and a leather loop with which to drag them from their slotted wooden rack and heave them onto a raked surface for consultation. One of the tasks of the trainee was to assist the frailer members of the classical studies community to lift the book catalogue into a position to be used.

The volumes of the book catalogue contained thick paper pages which had paper slips stuck in describing each book and alongside each entry was a small coloured oval of paper, known as a beetle, on which was written the classmark. It was also the trainee who wrote the classmarks and pasted in the beetles. The beetles were created by hammering a punch into many-folded sheets of coloured paper. They were written using a pot of India ink and a dipping pen and stuck using a large stone jar of gum arabic and a small brush – at the main enquiry / issue desk – a combination fraught with potential disaster. A smudged library version of tar and feather far removed from our clean and pure and precise digital retrieval systems which are so untrammelled by reality.

Crocodiles

I had early responsibility thrust on me since only one member of staff was on duty at the library on a Saturday, eating their lunch in the office to maintain a presence throughout the day. The Director at the time, Professor Eric Handley displayed staff management skills of the highest order by bringing a bottle of wine through from his office to share a glass with me while I ate my sandwich on one of my early Saturdays.

Professor Handley's information retrieval skills were the object of my undying envy. One of his interests were the models, or possibly mummified remains, of crocodiles from Egypt recovered in various archaeological digs and preserved in the British Museum. These were wrapped in scraps of papyrus, and naturally enough it was used papyrus on which writing could still be discerned. If the crocodiles were unwrapped with extreme care, then there was the possibility that copies of hitherto lost lines of ancient Greek plays could be discovered, preserved as fragments on the papyrus. Information retrieval through the dismantling of mummified crocodiles, perhaps the ideal fusion of my original chosen careers and the ultimate triumph of content over form, or possibly vice versa.⁷

There was never such an unexpected method of storing and transmitting knowledge. In a world where we have a dramatically reduced perspective on data preservation and intellectual property can be discussed in the context of a transient electronic copy in the dynamic memory of a PC or fax machine, such longevity is refreshing. It remains a matter of much regret that the elephant was not as sacred in Egypt as crocodiles or we might have far more of the corpus of ancient literature extant today.

Library Buildings

I have always been interested in library architecture and space planning and it was matter of some delight that when I joined Queen Mary College Library, I was able to

inspect the plans and indeed the footings for the new college library in advance. This was also a matter of due diligence since the original college library did not provide the ideal working environment and had required the devotion and ingenuity of college staff to make the best of the adverse conditions. That library consisted of a fine octagonal domed reading room, somewhat decayed from its original grandeur, with numerous subterranean extensions whose hessian and orange paint betrayed the likely date of their incorporation.

The Octagon had two towering galleries, to which the fainter-hearted dared not climb, furnished with rickety stepladders for reaching the upper shelves. One of the most popular requests was for a bucket, which was not a reaction to the process of study but a necessity as the roof leaked horribly at times and buckets lined with sound-deadening tissue were standard issue. I sat by the inscribed stone commemorating the foundation of the room as the library of the People's Palace in the East End. I have a memory that the foundation stone was laid by King Leopold II of the Belgians whose history of involvement in public welfare projects was notoriously slim, at least overseas.

That, of course, was long ago and the splendid new library was built at Queen Mary and Westfield College and since then a large new extension added to that (and the Octagon renovated and returned to much of its original beauty). The official opening of the new library was performed by Her Majesty the Queen and it was my task to conduct Her Majesty through the crowded law library, a task I managed to accomplish while probably obstructing every camera in the building. When I described the researchers as butterflies flitting among the shelves sipping the nectar of scholarship from the assembled volumes, Her Majesty said 'Oh really' and passed on, firmly shepherded by the Principal who cast not a glance behind him.

There had been strict security before the visit; so much so that all the library staff as well as readers had been excluded from the building during a final security sweep involving sniffer dogs which roamed the library building freely. Unfortunately the tea of cream cakes had already been laid out and these industrious dogs did not leave anything to chance, appearing from the building with rings of cream around their noses.

European Union

My job at Queen Mary College, latterly Queen Mary and Westfield College, was as European Documentation Centre Librarian as well as Law Librarian, encompassing the sources of some of the most profound changes in our legal system. I accepted an invitation from the European Parliament to go to Luxembourg to learn about the democratic deficit at first hand. I enjoyed a club class flight, my first and only taste of such luxury, marred only by airline staff who tried to remove me from this prestigious area because I looked too young, or too thin. I felt I had at least come close to identifying some sort of deficit when I encountered the free bar preceding lunch in one of the private dining rooms of the Parliament where bottles of whisky and gin were lined up for consumption. I did my best to rectify matters.

The study paid off because I was able to field innumerable queries resulting from the rapid expansion of European legislation and from the opportunities which the European Communities offered. There was the man on holiday from the Azores in London – unlikely but true – who had made a special trip to the East End to ask if he could get a grant to put plastic above his pineapples to assist in ripening them. Or the person from

the West of Ireland who asked how much of the brown peaty deposit he could strain out of the spring water which passed his cottage on the way to the seas and still call the result 'natural' spring water when he bottled it.

The delight of that post was the opportunity to get to know readers and colleagues, students and faculty; I had a real feeling of belonging. I occasionally meet people who were law students at the time and they tell me they have good memories of the law library and me – of course they are lying but it still gives me a warm glow. However, I have never again met the student who, under close questioning by a High Court judge about his argumentation in a moot trial, managed to use as his whole answer a throw-away "whatever" - three times.

Institute of Advanced Legal Studies

What makes law librarianship worthwhile might be a moral dimension, if not on the Moses scale, but the fun is of course the people, and particularly those in BIALL, the American Association of Law Libraries, the International Association of Law Libraries, and others; friends and colleagues across many countries. I could have written at length about law librarianship, the associations of law librarians and the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (IALS) where I presently work. However, will anyone ever be imprudent enough to ask me to write about early experiences of librarianship again? So I have probably run out of space for innumerable stories about IALS, let alone the official history of the Institute which has recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.⁸

I have been exceptionally fortunate to be associated with the IALS for some time, firstly in a very junior post and later on my return as Librarian. It has always had great staff many of whom have gone on to work at law libraries across the country, there is a great body of researchers from across the UK and overseas who use it, and great collections. (Its web site at <http://ials.sas.ac.uk> gives much information about it, its collections are summarised at <http://lon.ac.uk/garside/ials.html>, and its catalogue is at <http://library.sas.ac.uk>). IALS continues to provide many challenges at the centre of developments in provision for legal research. I may even be able to use my experience of grand openings eventually because a project has just begun for a new building in Russell Square.

Postscript

I have written above about information organisation, storage and retrieval although in rather uncommon forms. I hope I shall be unwrapping crocodiles for many years, truckloads of them. Of course where you find your crocodiles, what form they take, and what you get when you unwrap them are different for all of us but it tends to be the wrapper that is important not what is inside.

¹ With apologies for reworking this passage which I read long ago: "Moses was the first librarian of which we have any record. When God established the first law library he appointed Moses librarian, and this meek man came down from the mountain carrying the whole library on his shoulder, but he was not as prudent as he was meek, for he saw his people acting so foolishly that he threw it down and broke it to pieces." Sherrill. Address of Welcome. Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the American Association of Law Libraries held at Asheville, NC, May 24-28, 1907. 1 *Law Libr. J* (1908) 1,2 cited in Heckel (1982) Questions and answers 75 *Law Libr. J.* 299 at 305

² Bade, Edward. (1949) Quo vadimus? 2 *J. Legal Ed.* 41 at 51 cited in Christine Brock, (1984) Law libraries and librarians: a revisionist history. 67 *Law Libr. J.* 325 at 369

³ Bade. *Ibid.*, at p.44

⁴ Bade. *Ibid.* at 50

⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, author of *The library of Babel* which opens "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number ...", was Director of the National Library of Argentina. 'The library of Babel' appears in English for example in: Jorge Luis Borges. *Labyrinths: selected stories and other writings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.

⁶ "A magical accident in the Library, which as has already been indicated is not a place for your average rubber-stamp-and-Dewey-decimal employment, had some time ago turned the Librarian into an orang-utan. He had since resisted all efforts to turn him back. He liked the handy long arms, the prehensile toes and the right to scratch himself in public, but most of all he liked the way big questions about existence had suddenly resolved themselves into a vague interest in where his next banana was coming from." Terry Pratchett, *Sourcery*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1988 at p.16

⁷ The key word for this is evidently 'cartonnage' and the literature on it varies from the fairly general to the highly technical and here is a selection:

Bianchi, R.S. (1982) Egyptian mummies: myth and reality. 35 *Archaeology* 18-25

Cockle, W.E.H. (1983) Restoring and conserving papyri. 30 *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 147-165

Fosse, B. et al. (1981) An easy and cheap method of removing papyrus from gesso cartonnage. 56 *Symbolae Osloenses* 171-179

With many thanks to Colin Annis, Librarian of the Institute of Classical Studies, for these references and for noting that the first line of the Fosse article reads "Dissolve 7.1 grams of dikaliumhydrogenphosphate (K₂HPO₄) and 1.4 grams of kaliudihydrogenphosphate (KH₂PO₄) per litre of distilled water" so I might not want to pursue that one further.

⁸ Diamond, A.L. (1999) The early development of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. *In Law at the Centre: The Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at fifty*. Ed. B.A.K.Rider. London, Kluwer Law International, 19-30.

W.A. Steiner. (1994) The establishment of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies of the University of London. 17 *IALS Bulletin* 6-20;

W.A. Steiner (1999) A note on the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. *In Law at the Centre: The Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at fifty*. Ed. B.A.K.Rider. London, Kluwer Law International, 1-18.

W.A. Steiner. (In press) *The Institute of Advanced Legal Studies of the University of London 1947-1976*. London: IALS.