

Bowing Out of the Court: an Interview with Lynn Pollack



Jacqueline Elliott

Court Librarian, High Court of Australia

J.: Lynn, you were at the Law Courts Library for 20 years but what did you do before that?

L.: Apart from holiday jobs as mail clerk in my father's Grafton law firm, my first appointment in 1957 (at 16) was to the Australian Section of what is now the National Library of Australia in Canberra. At the Library's request I enrolled in Chinese I and Oriental Civilization I at the Canberra University College (then an offshoot of Melbourne University). My first few months were mainly shelving books in freezing cold concrete tunnels (Nissen huts) and sorting catalogue cards. I was extremely fortunate to have Pauline Fanning as my first "boss" - her ability to communicate with the scholars, her genuine interest in their research, her high work standards, and her concern for her staff's needs had a lasting impression on me. With regard to work however, I was delighted when I was moved up to the Parliamentary Reading Room as I loved being part of the buzz which that entails. I was actually working in the Reading Room the night my father died in October 1957. This meant a sudden return to Grafton and abandoning my studies. My time in Canberra was very short but very influential as I made some lifelong friends who had an enormous influence on me.

On return to Grafton I enrolled as a student at law and worked as an articled clerk for my father's partner. However, we were unable to find a solicitor to purchase a share of the practice and the barrister who later became a partner needed to be articled. At this stage my younger brother announced he was not interested in law so we sold our share of the practice and in early 1959 at the ripe old age of 18, I set off by ship for Europe.

I was away for two years hitchhiking and working for an agency as a temporary dictaphone typist. This was an unbelievably marvellous experience and again I have many very dear friends from this period of my life.

On my return to Australia I moved to Sydney. It was 1961 - jobs were scarce and I had no qualifications - I found a job as a debenture clerk for Custom Credit (ironically at 180 Phillip Street) and stayed there for just over a year until my flatmate heard of an MP who needed a Parliamentary Secretary at Rockdale. This I loved but unfortunately my member lost his seat in the 1963

elections I then worked for our local member (Cowper) in his Sydney office for 9 months but missed the people contact and came upon an ad for library staff at the University of Sydney Law School

Thurles Thomas, the Law Librarian, obviously took a great chance in appointing me but I had several fascinating years at the Law School in the old library and Thurles (with her encyclopaedic knowledge of legal materials) and Enid Roberts (with her Technical Services expertise) taught me an enormous amount which was topped up by my library school training

I moved from the Law School to the State Library when the opportunity came up to look after Attorney General's for 6 weeks with the possibility of two years at the Supreme Court The AG's six weeks was wonderful - my first library of my own - but the Supreme Court appointment did not eventuate at that time as I did not have a law degree then I had brief sojourns at the State Library, In-Service Education and National Fitness Library before I was appointed to the Department of Labour and Industry Library I was there 18 months before I went back to Attorney General's in 1969 and I remained there very happily until the end of 1975 It was during this period I finished my law studies and was admitted to the Bar

J.: Were you attracted to a court library for any particular reason?

L.: To tell you the truth I really loved the Attorney General's Library and would have gladly spent the rest of my working life there. I particularly enjoyed the mix of law and politics and there were enormous challenges at the time as we were expanding our services to what were then the Public Solicitors' Office, Clerk of the Peace, Corporate Affairs etc However, I was asked to take over the Supreme Court when Leone [Glynn] was appointed a conciliation commissioner and that was an enormous compliment and an incredible challenge I really didn't consider refusing the offer although as I anticipated, it was not easy taking over after Leone. Her intellectual and people skills are outstanding and she was loved and respected by the judges and by the library staff

J.: What special aspects of court libraries concentrate the mind of a library manager?

L.: It is vital in a court library for the judges and their staff to have confidence in the ability of their Librarian and to trust her discretion To earn this confidence and trust takes time as there are only very small windows of time when the Judges and Masters are out of court and it requires a special effort to establish this rapport A court librarian needs to understand the jurisdiction and powers of the Court and to be alert to anything which might affect the court whether that be decisions of other courts, legislative changes, court management developments or social issues If humanly possible you need to have anticipated these and have already adjusted the Library's collection and services before

changes occur. Participating in AJJA activities is a very helpful way of keeping alert to relevant issues and for getting to know the Judges and Registrars on a more personal level.

Court libraries must be proactive. You need to be able to respond immediately when information is needed. Information not supplied in time will have been obtained from another source or the decision made without it, leaving the door wide open to an appeal with all its consequent costs. It is very exciting, challenging work. I was constantly inspired by the integrity and intellectual superiority of the judges and felt so privileged when they would share their thoughts with me, and incredibly rewarded when they indicated something I gave them had helped them.



Josie Taylor, Lynn Pollack, and Chairman of the Law Courts Library Committee, Mr Justice Priestley

J.: Now you have been retired for a little while what do you regard as your main achievement in 20 years as Librarian in charge of the Law Courts Library?

L.: I think it is too early for me to make this assessment. Moving and amalgamating the library without interrupting service to the Judges was obviously a major achievement and this was repeated to a lesser extent on several occasions when the collection was re-arranged. Implementing Dynix and the Law Courts Library Information Network were also significant highlights. The negotiations surrounding the implementation of the access fee and the changes to the practice notes re authorities for full courts may well have the greatest long term benefits. Probably, however, just managing a joint venture for so long was an achievement in itself.

J.: What did you find the most difficult part of your job as Library Manager and what did you enjoy most?

L.: The most difficult part of my job was cancelling subscriptions for serials particularly when I had put an enormous effort into obtaining the title in the first place and we had spent a lot of time establishing the relevant records. I guess this was not difficult as such - I just found it extremely difficult to motivate myself because I knew I could have done so much else more interesting and rewarding in the time spent on cancelling the subscriptions and adjusting the records

Time went fastest for me when I was tackling an interesting research project or a difficult computer problem. However, I enjoyed planning and seeing my plans come to fruition and I also found it very rewarding to see the achievements of library staff and judges' personal staff I had helped to train. I also derived a great deal of satisfaction from some of my Committee work, particularly the IALL 1981 Conference Organising Committee and my year on the ABN Network Committee. My year at CLIRS was a marvellous experience and again the source of many very close friends.

J.: There have been many changes in libraries in recent times. What changes had most effect on the work of the Library in the period you were in charge?

L.: The growth in looseleaf services had the most significant impact. The Law Courts Library received 43 issues a year in 1977 which had grown to 5000 issues a year by 1989. These absorbed so much staff time, space and money they almost completely changed the role of the library until we took the drastic step to cut back and restrict loans. ABN, on-line services, DYNIX, CD-ROMS and now the Internet have also obviously been major changes, all of which have benefitted the Library.

J.: It was always difficult balancing the budget in a library which had funds both from the Commonwealth and the State. I used to watch in horror as you weaved your way through the complexity of the Law Courts finances. Do you think the Law Courts Library funding could be simplified in any way?

L.: Ideally both governments should deposit the allocation for the Library into an account similar to our Access Account so that one accounting system could be used instead of three.

J.: I am interested in your thoughts on library training. Do you find the graduates of today are able to step into jobs as easily as before?

L.: Perhaps I have been very fortunate with the new graduates we have had. It is a little difficult to compare them with previous graduates as, with computerization, they are really not stepping into the same sort of jobs. On the whole, our recent graduates have been quicker to assume the management mantle and have been ready to participate in management decision-making almost from day one. They certainly have superior computer skills. The law

elective at UNSW has made a difference as most come with a basic knowledge of legal research techniques and legal materials which we can top up. Technical Service expertise has always depended on experience and this is still a major problem. I have found library technicians who have upgraded their qualifications usually have the soundest technical service skills.

J.: You have spent time on the IALL Committee as I do now. Do you think Australia is too isolated from overseas developments? What would you suggest to overcome the problems of distance?

L.: Not now. Internet conference lists have made all the difference. I have had more contact with overseas colleagues in the past 12 months than in the previous 20 years despite my involvement with IALL. There is however nothing quite like face to face contact and my attendance at the Court Librarians' Conference in Columbus, Ohio, was invaluable. I found it more useful on the whole than IALL conferences which tend to attract more academic librarians and where the focus is often on materials our Library could not afford. I find INI-LAW useful for this information but tend to gain more practical information from NETWATCH, DYNIX_L, TEKNOIDS and the jurisdiction based lists in ANZ, Canada and the UK.

J.: Have you any suggestions for the future direction of the Australian Law Librarians' Group?

L.: It would be useful if the Group could be the focal point for continuing critical analysis of new electronic legal publications. My own experience indicates that it would be preferable if a mechanism could be developed to publish these anonymously to avoid repercussions at an institutional level. Perhaps someone or some state could be nominated to collect comments on changes, good points, bad points etc in, for example, electronic caselaw or electronic legislation, and to collate these into regular columns for the journal or email articles.

I think the Group needs to maintain its profile as the principal critical, responsible consumer of legal information and to act more or less as the watchdog for other consumers of legal information.

J.: Technology in libraries is moving very fast. What sort of balance do you envisage we shall end up having between books and electronic information?

L.: Oh, to be an oracle! Very hard to tell. I suspect we will still need books to explore ideas and for comparative studies but will these be in libraries? The recent trend in the US to set up entirely electronic libraries in law firms cannot be ignored. The other side of the coin is the emphasis on the need for preservation which tends to be outweighed by the cost of preservation. I have been horrified to see how fast our newer materials are deteriorating. Perhaps

we will end up with archive collections only. It will be interesting to observe the effect on the eyesight of those who have used computers for over 20 years and whether this will influence the net result. After 15 years constant use of computers I find I have to ration my computer use and some of my more computer literate judges have had similar experiences. In a few years computer users around 25 may experience similar problems and they will be young enough to come up with an alternative. Perhaps mental telepathy will replace electronic information as predicted in the science fiction movies. An interesting quote I read today suggests this would actually be a reversion to pre-settlement days when libraries did not exist in Australia:

‘White fellow law is weak, it is only in the books, but black fellow law is strong, it is in the minds of the people.’

J.: Computerisation of the library seems to have made law librarians twice as busy. What were the main difficulties you encountered in this process at the Law Courts?

L.: The biggest problem was maintaining the manual systems at the same time as the computerised systems and maintaining staff and reader expertise in using both.

The sheer volume of material and records to be converted was a problem in itself. We did not have sufficient funding to carry out our retrospective conversion quickly and cleanly. Even if we had been adequately funded, it is unlikely we could have found sufficient contractors with appropriate expertise and experience and we would not have had enough terminals to accommodate them all nor enough inhouse staff to supervise the work. My biggest frustration was well meaning IT personnel who protected the security of their systems by restricting access to certain functions forcing library personnel to be dependent on service staff who were already over extended. On occasions when we managed to break through the barrier there were significant increases in productivity and job satisfaction as library staff increased their technical skills and were able to diagnose problems more accurately and improve work methods accordingly.

J.: It must be very different getting up in the morning and not going into your usual work routine. What do you think you will miss most?

L.: My title. I have just read a very inspiring book *“The Aboriginal Gift Spirituality for a Nation”* by Eugene Stockton (Millennium Books, 1995) which discusses the economic perspective of western peoples. One of the negative results of economic development in Australia is seen to be “the individual defined by his or her work”. I suspect this is true and that I will find it difficult to establish my identity in some social situations.

Seriously, I will miss the people - all of them - they’ve been my extended

family for so much of my life and I will really miss the day-to-day contact and constant learning process

And, of course, I'll miss the books (my friends), the network and the view!!

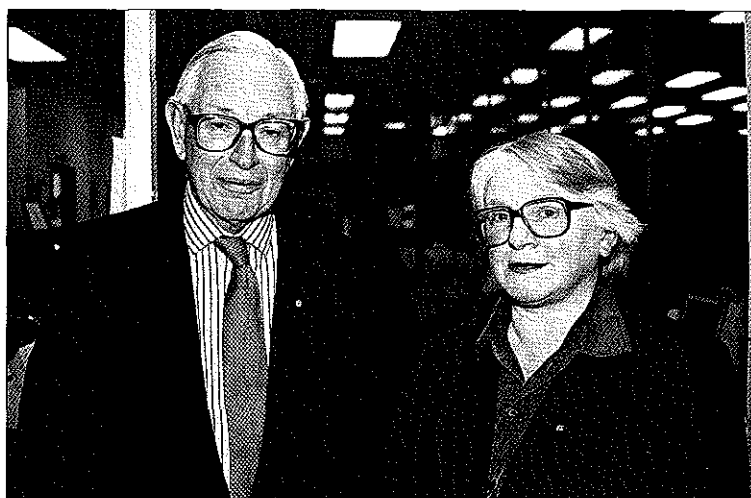
J.: I think the books are our security

L.: They were certainly my friends I used to go and pat them at times and even talk to them occasionally as I walked through the stacks

J.: Tell us about your plans in retirement. It is not so much "retirement" as a change of direction, isn't it?

L.: I have a ten-year re-training plan to develop areas of my knowledge where I believe a raised consciousness will add to my quality of life These include studying music, philosophy, psychology and cooking all intertwined with travel I have started my music studies exploring the music of the Australian aborigines and hope to visit many sacred sites over the next few years For a long time I have had a pre-occupation with "the spirit of place" and I now find this is reflected in the "dreaming" and the important role music plays in the legal education of the aborigines and their relationship with the land My thirst for knowledge is enormous at the moment and I am wallowing in the luxury of indulging my interests after so many years struggling to try to keep my mountain of unfinished work under control

J.: Thank you, Lynn, for taking the time for this interview. I know that all the law librarians wish you well in retirement and look forward to seeing you at the various conferences



Retired Chief Justice of Australia, Sir Anthony Mason, and Lynn Pollack photographed at Lynn's farewell party in the Library.