

Two Conferences, A World Apart - Highlights, Similarities and Differences

*"Adapting to RealITy Law, Computers and Change
in Libraries" and "On the Edge"*

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The 27th annual study conference of the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians was held at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, Newtonabbey, just outside Belfast, Northern Ireland on 6-9 September 1996 and the 7th Asian Pacific Specials, Health and Law Librarians' Conference was held in Perth, Western Australia on 12-16 October 1997. I was privileged to attend the BIALL conference in Belfast as the Butterworths sponsored representative of the Australian Law Librarians' Group. Having just been involved with the organisation of and participation in the "On the Edge" conference in Perth, I was struck by a number of comparisons between the two conference

First to the Differences

The major difference between the two was the audience each conference was aimed at. The BIALL conference was specifically for law librarians while the Perth conference had an audience of specials, health and law librarians; consequently many of the papers were interdisciplinary. There was also a marked difference in the size of each audience. In Belfast there were a little over 200 attendees while the number of people attending in Perth was almost 600.

From a personal perspective I also noticed a number of differences. In Belfast as a sponsored delegate I was welcomed by Barbara Tearle, Chair, BIALL, before leaving Perth with an email invitation to dinner with the organising committee on 5 September, the night I arrived. Dinner was held at Restaurant 44, a leading restaurant in the heart of Belfast, close to the infamous Europa Hotel. In Perth I was just one of the *workers*. Each experience, that of being a sponsored delegate and that of being one of the workers was unique.

Another personal difference - at the end of the Belfast conference I was fortunate enough to be able to take an extended holiday in Northern Ireland, The Czech Republic, England and the USA before returning home late in October. While in London, I spent most of a day as guest of Butterworths where I was shown their London operations, their library, spoke with their Overseas Distribution Manager and met up with Stephen Stout, most will remember him as Butterworths former leader in Australia. After the Perth conference I was just exhausted!

An obvious difference was the type of venue - in Belfast the conference was held at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, situated on the edge of the Belfast Lough at Newtonabbey. Most delegates were housed in adjacent student

accommodation. A certain camaraderie develops when delegates are woken, not once, but twice, by fire alarms being mischievously set off in the middle of the night! That aside, the accommodation was certainly adequate although there was quite a hike to breakfast and to the lecture theatres, certainly further in fact than the walk from the Duxton Hotel in Perth to the Perth Concert Hall where the plenary sessions were held. The venue in Perth was without question delightful, with the staff at the Duxton generally going out of their way to make delegates comfortable. I have to say that both kinds of venues have advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of student accommodation include the resulting friendships and the cost. The advantage of hotel accommodation is luxurious comfort, with the major disadvantage being the cost. Each of the venues worked well for the number of delegates each conference attracted.

The Similarities

I felt the most significant similarity to be the tyranny of distance and a reluctance by some people to travel the distances required. Although Belfast is on the eastern seaboard of Northern Ireland, it is close to the western edge of Europe and was also at that time emerging from a spell of "The Troubles". Perth is definitely on the western edge of Australia and considered to be so far away from the eastern seaboard. Both cities are relatively isolated and sometimes expensive to reach - but both have special qualities about them. In the case of Belfast, there was an obvious renewal of spirit with new buildings being erected. The weather there was particularly pleasant as it was in Perth. It is difficult to be objective about my "adopted" home town, with its beautiful gardens and the lovely Swan River.

The way in which legal information is provided and the emergence of new technologies was a common theme at both conferences. Should we let the information technologists take over the provision of information presented in electronic form, or should we adapt and learn to use these new media? I felt optimistic after attending each of these conferences and am left with a feeling that we can take charge and make these new media work for us.

Highlights from Belfast

There were several highlights from Belfast - the major highlight for me was a visit to the Linen Hall Library and bus tour of Belfast as part of the Sunday afternoon tours programme. The Linen Hall Library was founded in 1788 and is the oldest private subscription library in the city. This library offers a unique Irish and local studies collection and has many old and very rare items in its collection. I had chosen this tour while still in Australia and was even more intrigued after I heard John Gray's opening talk on Friday afternoon with the title "Documenting a community in conflict - the Northern Ireland political collection at the Linen Hall Library". It became easy to understand why John is so passionate about his library and its role in collecting the political ephemera of "The Troubles". Librarians and other staff at this library must leave their personal politics at the door when they arrive, they go out not always during work hours to collect whatever ephemera is available on the streets and consequently there are many unique treasures in all corners of this library, which is almost bursting at the seams. The bus tour then

took us up to the Shankhill Road, the Falls and Arderton areas where we were shown, from the bus, the Sinn Fein headquarters. A Belfast librarian also on this tour admitted she had never been to these areas and would not be there at all if she was not on this bus tour.

The keynote address on Saturday morning "*Adapting to Reality: law, computers and change in libraries*" given by Lorcan Dempsey, director of the United Kingdom Office for Library and Information Networking, highlighted how the roles of librarians and library material are changing - there is a global movement of weightless bits with the convergence of conduit industries (phone, cable, the Internet) and the old content industries (publishing, entertainment, TV). He ended his talk by saying that unless librarians become Bit Managers they will only be bit players

Two speakers spoke on Irish law, Professor Brigid Hadfield spoke on "Language and the Northern Ireland Constitution" and Professor Brice Dickson, "The impact of Northern Ireland on English and European Law" Both papers were interesting and informative, outlining how the law in Northern Ireland has interacted or not as the case may be with that of mainland England. Saturday morning's papers concluded with a paper by John Dale "IOLIS and the way ahead", a development of a CD-ROM for students learning law, containing interactive instruction in the areas of contract, tort, criminal law, European law, public law and property law.

Saturday afternoon was taken up with Special Interest Group meetings and as I did not really fit into any category and was still a little tired from the long flight, I took myself on a long walk beside the Belfast Lough towards the open sea. I came across an old stone ruin, part of an old castle with suburbs encroaching, wild blackberries on the side of the road; a very pleasant way to get rid of slothfulness

On Sunday morning we heard Professor Joan Howland, Professor of Law and Director of Information and Technology, University of Minnesota Law School, give her paper "Digital information projects and services in American law libraries" which described the digital collections, and/or digital libraries and their development in America. She also spoke on "Studies in Scarlet" which is a current Research Libraries Group project examining collaborative efforts to digitalise materials and to develop virtual collections in both the United States and Great Britain. Digital archiving takes up so little space but the downside is that these archives will last only as long as the medium, i.e. diskettes or CD-ROMs. While talking of the Internet she praised the immediacy but questioned the accuracy of the information being delivered. This question arose again in Perth

Later that morning several papers were delivered covering the delivery of electronic materials in the UK; EUROTEXT, a project in the on-demand publishing field; Livenote and the electronic delivery of transcripts, and Statute Law Database, a database of UK statute material that is expected to be marketed commercially in 1998. James Butler wrote about this database in his article after attending the BIALL conference in Birmingham in 1994, he will be delighted to know that it is up and running¹

¹ *Australian Law Librarian* 3(1) 1995 p 22-27

Monday morning's sessions were most interesting, the first paper by Jennefer Aston of the Law Library at the Four Courts in Dublin was on the selection dilemma with print and electronic alternatives. It is good sense both economically and politically to have a collection policy and to follow such a policy. To involve clients in selection also helps to strengthen the relationship between the librarian and the client.

Sue Ellaby of Wilde Sapte, London spoke next on "Changing Budgetary Priorities", once again it discussed the management of both paper and electronic collections. She raised the question of charging for electronic materials, maintaining it is difficult to control the budget for online access to materials. Discussions must take place with electronic publishers to ensure a fair method of charging for their products and suggesting savings should be made when subscribing to both the paper and electronic version of the same product. In the climate of the 1990s budgets must be elastic as the costs of printed and electronic materials fluctuate dramatically. Does this sound familiar to Australian law librarians?

Sue was followed by David Byrne, BT Group Legal Services, "Enlarging the Reference Base". Reference work being at the core of a law librarian's work is all about challenges as much information is hidden or difficult to locate. With electronic means; inhouse databases, commercial online databases and the global network of computers, the Internet, hidden information often becomes more easily available, thus stretching the traditional boundaries of the conventional library. Law librarians now need to understand the structure of information, the form in which it is published and its availability. The virtual law librarian faces new challenges; user needs and expectations, the technological means by which much information is now distributed and making the budget stretch to cover this extended access to information. The virtual librarian must also be proactive in publicising the enlarged reference base.

Professor Richard Danner from the Duke University School of Law Library was the last speaker on the programme, his topic being "Organisation and staff - the American experience". The library Professor Danner is involved with purchased its first personal computer for library use in 1983. By the time he gave this paper the student network extended to 215 active connections at various sites throughout the library. 85 carrels are equipped with networked desktop computers, the others provide connections for portable computers. A pre-requisite for the 1996 class is that they own computers with capabilities for accessing the law school network from their residences. Network email systems have developed into primary means of communication, in many cases replacing the distribution of printed information. These changes have meant changes in the way in which library staff are asked to provide information, librarians must now revel in change, not be phased by it. There is the possibility that if librarians do not cope well with change in the computer world, then they will be regarded as keepers of dusty old books and the information technologist will take over the tasks of providing clientele with legal information. At present these technologists do not have the subject specialisation and the question remains of how relevant that information will be. It is up to law librarians to take advantage of and use the opportunities we are being faced with to

expand our knowledge and activities

I also attended the BIALL Annual General Meeting and Members' Forum. It was interesting to note at the AGM change of subscriptions were again discussed, these are an agenda item everywhere it seems. BIALL are now paying an editor for *The Law Librarian*. It is expected that revenue from advertising will pay for his salary. Is this something that should be considered for the *Australian Law Librarian*? At the Members' Forum time ran out for all those who wished to speak, I agree with James Butler that members feel less intimidated about speaking in an informal forum². Topics discussed at the Members' Forum included the timing of the next conference, grants for retirees to attend conferences, and BIALL providing bursaries for members.

The social activities associated with this conference included the new delegates' tea held on Friday afternoon before the conference proper was opened, a great way for new delegates to meet. I agree with James Butler's suggestion that it should be adopted as part of future conferences in Australia³. The first formal dinner, the 27th Annual Dinner was held on Saturday evening immediately after the President's Reception at the Balmoral Centre. This dinner was followed by Irish dancing, Ceili. I will forever be grateful to David Hart for making me dance - fun but not even close to Riverdance. The second formal dinner was on Sunday evening when a dinner and dance was held at the Stormont Hotel, close to Stormont Castle. Again a very pleasant evening indeed.

The conference ended, with many of us taking the optional afternoon tour to the Giant's Causeway in the north east of Northern Ireland - I chose to do this and I am glad I did. The scenery in that part of the world is spectacular and green. It was a clear day and we could see across the water to Scotland.

I stayed on in Belfast for several days and spent a little time with David Smith, librarian at the Bar in Belfast. The Bar Library and Supreme Court Library are situated in the same building, and most of this building had been beautifully restored after IRA bombings. During troubles this building is a target, a danger David lives with. The Bar Library has started a fines system for overdue books. Some books can be borrowed for one hour, some for one day and others for one week. The fines work on a per unit system, five pounds sterling per unit. This is an interesting concept and one which may require further investigation in my library.

Perth Highlights

The five plenary speakers in Perth left delegates feeling optimistic about the future of librarianship. The theme for them all was that librarians are the Information Professionals, but we are being challenged in that role by information technologists. We can and we must take charge and make the professional changes.

2 *Australian Law Librarian* 3(1) 1995 p 25

3 *Australian Law Librarian* 3(1) 1995 p 22

necessary to become the information leaders, the term that the first plenary speaker, Betty Eddison used. Betty, who was instrumental in starting the company that now provides InMagic to the world gave a most interesting paper with the title "On the Edge of the Millennium - Looking into the Future". We need to know the goals of our organisations, to know the power centres, to define the organisations information needs and to provide them and to constantly review them.

Unfortunately, due to committee responsibilities, I missed the second plenary speaker, Ch'ng Kim See from the National Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. I have been told on good authority that it was one of the most interesting papers presented. I was able to make up a little for this omission as I was seated next to Kim See at the conference dinner and found her to be absolutely delightful and feel I have made a new friend.

The third plenary speaker, Sylvia Webb, whose paper, "'Know-How' and Knowing How: The Changing Context of Information Provision and the Role of the Professional", discussed the skills and knowledge librarians *on the edge* will need to ensure that their future directions take them successfully into the next millennium. Sylvia, has completed a report of a study she contracted to do for the British Library in 1996 and she spoke about this project again at the law firms' Special Interest Group meeting on Wednesday afternoon.

Wednesday's plenary speaker, Dr Joanne Gard Marshall from the University of Toronto asked the question, where are we going as library and information professionals and what do we need to get there? She then spoke of the trends taking place and how we can fit them into our professional lives. She has been partly responsible for the document "Competencies of Special Librarians for the 21st Century".

Richard Danner, who had also presented a paper in Belfast, spoke to the topic "Defining a Profession: Some Initial Problems". His paper is part of an ongoing project looking at the impact information technology is having on law librarianship and legal education. This paper looked largely at the relationships between librarians and other information professionals and how technology may affect these relationships in the workplace of the future. Will the users of special libraries in future have their information needs met by librarians, or by technologists? It is up to us to change and learn the new technologies as they become available. Only by doing this will we be able to stand up as a profession.

As Perth had concurrent sessions it was impossible to hear all the papers presented. Notable papers included Roslynn Membrey's "Client Services in the 1990's", Barry Padman's "Blackspots, Blind Curves and Other Traffic Hazards on the Information Super Highway", Tanya Aplin's "Critical Copyright Issues for Databases", Mary Rose Russell's "Return From the Market's Edge: Survival Strategies for Law Librarians", and her second paper "On the Edge of Credibility", Chris Shanahan's "Clinical Legal Information - An Opportunity for Innovation", Michael Maher's "Investors in People (iP) - Eversheds experiences" and Julie Johnson's "Why the Webmaster Should be YOU".

The final session on Thursday afternoon was another highlight with Jane Klobas delivering the Leslie Syme Memorial Lecture, "Knowledge, Management, Profession". As a committee we were happy to hand over to Tasmania at the end of this afternoon session and wish them well with their conference in 1999

Much networking took place at both the conference and the social activities associated with it. The convening committee is very happy with the overall response from delegates who voted it one of the best conferences ever. The conference dinner was oversubscribed; it was the social highlight of the week and "The Fab Four", the musicians for the evening, now have a totally different concept of librarians!

For those who are interested most of the papers from the BIALL conference were published in *The Law Librarian* of December 1996 and the proceedings from the Perth conference are available at <http://www.trimagic.com.au/edge>

And Finally

Michael Maher was the Butterworths sponsored delegate from the UK and I was delighted to welcome him on his first visit to Perth. I would like to thank Butterworths again and commend them for their foresight in providing the invaluable sponsorship I was able to accept in 1996. I understand that Butterworths Australia will no longer be supporting this project and I would very strongly suggest that they reconsider this decision and continue this sponsorship - the cost involved is far outweighed by the goodwill and collegiate spirit engendered. It is a heartening experience to be able to be part of what is essentially an international conference on the other side of the world and to network with librarians from all sections of law librarianship to discuss matters common to us all.