

Passing on the Torch – an Interview with Lorraine Weinman

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G: How long were you at the Attorney-General's Department Library?

L: 23 years

G: Where were you before?

L: I was at the Department of External Territories Library until Papua New Guinea became independent. The library was absorbed into Foreign Affairs, and became the precursor of the Ausaid Library.



Lorraine Weinman

G: Tell me about your first day at AG's - did you wear a sari?

L: Oh no!

G: I only asked because my sources tell me that when you did wear a sari to work later, it caused quite a stir... some of the lawyers reading in the library even lowered their newspapers to peer at this manifestation of mystique and exoticism, which would have been quite unusual in the Attorney-General's Department!

L: Well, people did comment on how nice I looked, and I did hear that a couple of people had fantasies about the end of the sari getting caught in a revolving door and unravelling! (Not that we had revolving doors at AG's). But it was a very innocent society in those days, and you could walk in and out of AG's, and even Old Parliament House, without a security check, and everyone would smile at you. I must say it has been wonderful to be in Australia, and to have been unquestioningly accepted as an Australian, without a moment of discrimination.

G: What is your most vivid memory of AG's?

L: There are so many I don't know where to start. We used to hold the most wonderful Library parties - and everyone came, even High Court judges. We used to serve a very powerful punch. One memory I have is of someone, who shall remain nameless, because he is still there, standing up on the loans desk and singing "Hava Nagilah" in Latin!

G: Who was the most interesting Attorney-General to work under?

L: They were all interesting in different ways, and they were all good, and very nice people too.

I remember Lionel Murphy very fondly because of his warmth, and his support for the library. Long after he had ceased to be Attorney-General, if I met him at a function he would say “Hi Lorraine - how’s the library? Getting enough money?” That’s another lovely memory - when the library was named after him, he brought his whole family to the ceremony. We had a cake specially made, with the scales of justice on it. He looked at the cake and said “You know - that’s not right - the Scales are never balanced”.

I remember Gareth Evans being a big fan of AGIS - he used to wait for it and if we were a bit late with it, he would be the first to ask where it was.

G: What are the things you have enjoyed most about being a librarian?

L: I like organizing things - there’s something very satisfying about getting things right so that people can use them. I like the practicality of it, but librarians need to be intuitive, too. Those two qualities make an interesting combination. I like the knowledge aspect - you need to tap into so many disciplines, your mind is constantly pushed outwards. Also, you meet so many people from so many walks of life, even just over the phone. I love the global nature of it - you get to know people in the most amazing places - and that’s how our networks work for our organizations. I enjoyed the travel too. I was originally offered two jobs - one at the ANU, and one at External Territories - I’ve never regretted taking the one at External Territories. Being in a Federal Department allows you to see what’s happening all over the country - I was really lucky to have that experience. It was an exciting time - things were blossoming in the 70s. I was there at a good time - people were secure in their jobs, and that made a big difference to the way we did our jobs. Everything became much harsher later, because of economic constraints - one of the problems for us was how to quantify the intangible - if you were restricted in how much time you put into a reference question, or what sources you searched, the whole case might be shot down in Court, or, on the other hand, quite by accident, you might find something that could change the direction of the whole case.

G: What did you like most about law librarianship in particular?

L: Law is different – it touches every aspect of people’s lives. Look at the legal issues being dealt with now – cloning, drugs in sport, cyberspace . . . You have to be one step ahead of every issue, response times have to be immediate, and your collection has to be readily at hand all around you. At the same time, though, you have to have an understanding of history – not just corporate knowledge, but an understanding of how and why things have developed. Experienced librarians develop that kind of memory, which I think, is being lost, unfortunately. You need both precision and an eye for detail as well as a wide general knowledge, even a good old-fashioned liberal education, and to be able to get interested in anything. I have been asked to find out things like “Is it true that Idi Amin went to Sandhurst?”, and I was once able to prove that the lines “Though every prospect pleases and only man is vile. . .” refer to Sri Lanka (or Ceylon, as it was called when the hymn was written), and not to Queensland (!) as the inquirer had thought, because I learned that hymn as a child in Sri Lanka. You don’t have to know the answer, but you do have to be able

to show that you are interested in things you may not know anything about Librarians can't know everything, and should not be afraid to say they don't know, but that they do know how to find out

- G:** Yes, I remember that you always used to ask in job interviews "What is an interesting reference question you have done recently?", and I have always thought that was a very good way to assess a prospective librarian's approach to reference work. It made the interview process much more interesting for the panel too!

What were the most challenging aspects of running a library covering a Federal portfolio?

- L:** In the Attorney-General's Department, because we were supporting a minister who advised the rest of the government on legal issues, we could not afford to put a foot wrong. Our minister had to be abreast and ahead of the legal aspects of every issue dealt with by the other 'single-issue' departments - law and health, law and sport, law and industrial relations etc. Of course, there were the problems of the bureaucracy too - there was the time when I actually resigned - in a dispute over the library space in the new building. Nobody knew what to do with my resignation letter, so nothing happened! But I believe in talking - to everyone in the organization. It's a good thing to do - as long as you are completely honest, and consistent in what you say - people will trust your integrity, and trust what you say. People are quite shy, you know - they don't talk to each other, and they won't come and see you - you have to go to them. I found that when we were setting up libraries throughout the portfolio, the new organizations would really listen to my advice - say, on library staffing. Then later when the librarians were appointed, many of them had had no experience with how the public service worked, and I was able to advise them.

- G:** Yes, I know I would never have survived my first years in the Family Court without your support, your ability to translate 'bureaucrat-ese', and often, your interceding on my behalf, and I am eternally grateful for it.

- L:** The Portfolio librarians were very special to me - we were a real network - and it was an example of how in librarianship nobody tells us to do things or how to do them - we initiate them ourselves, where we see a need, and we make them work. Even if we are professionally isolated in our organizations, that situation also gives us a lot of autonomy. Nobody told me to set up a Portfolio network, but I did it. Often I found myself fighting fires in every state - but it was worth it!

- G:** Tell me about your work for librarians on the industrial front.

- L:** I appeared before the Industrial Relations Commission twice in the 1980s. Before 1985, the standards for the librarians' classifications had no relation to reality. We collated information from lots of libraries, and had many, many meetings with the Public Service Board and the Union, until we finally got new standards accepted, and everybody's jobs could be upgraded. We worked closely with the Professional Officers' Association, and they were really helpful with the smaller professions like ours, with members spread thinly right across the Public Service. The Lionel

Murphy Library's jobs were re-classified first according to the new standards, and I was the first librarian to be gazetted to the position of Senior Principal Librarian Class 5. There weren't many of us, and now, nearly all those positions have been abolished - certainly all the Departmental librarians' positions have gone, and the networks have been broken up.

When I appeared before the Commission, I was cross-examined before the President, and asked about what sort of work levels and qualities I would expect in a librarian.

G: Did you thrive on situations like appearing before the Commission?

L: No, I am basically an introvert. Every time I've had to do it, I have been terrified, but I just made myself do it, because it was part of my job. When Diana Temby (Higgins) left the Attorney-General's Department, and I had to step into her shoes, I was quite frightened, but I found I was able to do it, because I had learned such a lot from her.

G: Who else influenced you?

L: As well as Diana - the late George Alcorn, Lynn Pollack, Rob Brian, and I have been lucky to have so many wonderful librarians to work with. I'd especially like to mention Kerrie Dickie (Milgate), who was my right hand for so many years.

G: Tell me about your achievements with the South Pacific law libraries program.

L: That's another example of something that nobody told us to do - Jacqui Elliott and I saw a need, worked out what to do, got all the 'twins' involved, and it works! People had been writing to the Department for years from South Pacific countries, asking if a librarian could visit to help them get their libraries in order. The Department used to be quite dismissive - why would they need a librarian? But once I had made the first trip, it became accepted. I received a lot of support from Alan Rose and Stephen Skehill, the two Departmental Secretaries, and a great deal of appreciation from the Attorneys-General and the Chief Justices in the countries we have helped. One Chief Justice wrote that he could not have done his job without our assistance. It's really rewarding for a librarian - once you battle the cockroaches, and get dirty, knock the shelving together, and organize the collection so that it means something, and people can understand what resources they have. It makes you realise what a lot we have here, and how little they have. I did a lot of scrounging - publishers were very helpful and provided books and CD-ROMs etc. After the fire in Tonga, they ended up with a better library than they had before the fire! I really miss that contact.

G: What did the Governor-General say when he presented you with your medal?

L: He said "Congratulations Lorraine, and this is one for Lionel too".

G: Do you have any advice for librarians for the future?

L: Hang in there! It's a great profession.

G: Thank you, Lorraine - from all of us.