

The changing face of learned and professional societies libraries

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Two Into One Will Go: A Learned Society in a Learned Environment

The British Museum

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I came to the British Museum from a background in medical librarianship (apart from a brief time spent working for the Anglican Church – but that is a whole different story) mostly running smallish professional association libraries. So there were many points of comparison, but more differences than I had expected.

I was used to the library being an important focus with a budget which was never enough but which did grow every year and with a constant stream of visitors from the newest student to eminent professors. It was a culture shock to come to an environment where objects were all and books were an “also ran”. I exaggerate slightly and the situation is improving steadily as the Libraries across the Museum are increasingly accepted as a valuable research resource – although not to the extent of improving budgets or recognising the importance of professional Library staff.

In the Centre for Anthropology Library we are more fortunate than some of the smaller departmental libraries, not only because we have five professionally qualified staff and four support staff, but also because of our close links with the Royal Anthropological Institute. This means that we have an extra part time member of staff, an RAI funded book and journal budget and access to review books attracted by the RAI’s two journals.

In 1976 the RAI had to move premises and no longer had the space to house its considerable library, or the funds to staff it adequately. The decision was made to gift the Library to the then Ethnography Department of the British Museum, whilst retaining access and borrowing rights for RAI Fellows and Members in perpetuity. The existing ethnography library was at that time no larger than any of the other departmental libraries. The addition of the RAI library stock and the subsequent move of the department to the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens were together the “kick-start” needed to develop the present Anthropology Library into its current prominent role in the management structure of the Museum’s libraries.

One of the difficulties in the working relationship between these two august institutions in the past has been a “them” and “us” approach to day to day library administration: RAI procedures versus Museum procedures and ne’er the twain shall meet. An advantage of a new Museum senior librarian being appointed just a few months before a new RAI library officer is that we have been able to work together towards integration. No longer is the RAI library officer excluded from my senior staff meetings, no longer are there jealously guarded “secrets”, no longer do we have separate procedures or suppliers. We are all members of one team working towards a common aim – to improve the service we offer our collective readers.

The other nine departmental libraries are administered by unqualified staff, although it is encouraging that three of them are currently undertaking distance learning courses in librarianship and a fourth is working towards Cilip chartership – without first undertaking a

library qualification. We meet regularly as a group to discuss current issues and problems and to share training sessions.

Some of the departmental libraries are still very small and exist more on the shelves of curators' offices rather than in any specifically designated library space, although this situation is improving. The Middle East Library occupies the glorious Arched Room designed by Sidney Smirke; the CfA on returning to the British Museum from the Museum of Mankind moved into the refurbished State Papers Room and the Asia Library is about to consolidate material scattered all over the Museum into one dedicated library space.

The pace of life is different; decisions must be discussed, chewed over, contemplated and discussed again. A simple example: when I moved to the CfA there was no water available in the Centre and the act of making a cup of tea necessitated either a quarter of a mile walk to the staff canteen, or taking a kettle through the throngs of visitors to the nearest staff loo where there was a tap with drinking water. It took three months of negotiating and nagging to achieve a simple cold water tap in a corner of the staffroom. It would take less time for Oxfam to bring water to a remote African village.

Two years ago I took up the long ongoing battle to get the Museum's union catalogue on line. Slowly, everyone who has a say in the matter has been convinced that it is a good idea; and that it fits in with the Director's eagerness to make the treasures of the Museum accessible to an ever wider audience. The curators, students, scholars and researchers whom we serve will all benefit from such an initiative, but there is still no money available for this project. Having juggled and connived, a classic case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, most of the money has been found, but there are yet more delays. For each problem we solve two more appear – Heracles in his battle with the Lernaean Hydra had it easy!

Librarianship has, for most of its long and honourable existence, been an undervalued profession and there are too many examples of this in the Museum. As I said earlier, most of the staff in the departmental libraries are unqualified. They work hard, in extremely difficult circumstances, to provide a good service to their readers. A few months ago we had an opportunity to appoint a new departmental librarian and I was hopeful that, with the improving attitude to our profession, although we were unlikely to be able to offer an exciting salary, we might at least be able to attract a professionally qualified librarian. Alas, the advert went out and I was horrified to read that we were looking for a capable person with at least five GCSEs. The salary offered was perhaps appropriate for that level of qualification, but even more horrifying was the list of tasks this person was expected to undertake: book selection, budgeting, cataloguing and classification etc, etc...

In the current job market I suppose that we shouldn't be surprised that we had over 250 applicants!

In the event we have been fortunate to appoint someone with great potential, a degree in the relevant subject, good experience as a library assistant and an eagerness to become professionally qualified; however, the overall process has reinforced the feelings that librarians are some way down the pecking order.

One of the many problems of existing in this particular environment is duplication of stock and of effort, in areas where the lines between the subject matter of several departmental libraries are blurred. When the Department of Ethnography moved back to the Museum in

2003 it lost its responsibilities for Asia and Europe. These subject areas are now covered by the restructured Department of Asia and the Department of Prehistory and Europe – but of course we are not going to abandon our existing collections in these fields and we are still interested in the ethnography of these regions. Such duplication was understandable and even useful when the Department was several miles away from HQ but is now an unnecessary waste of precious space and limited resources. But who is to give up, for example, their journal runs? My wonderful Serials Librarian has an attack of the vapours if anyone breathes of the possibility of closing a title – and who can blame her – continuity is important, particularly in this Library which has such close links with an outside organisation whose Fellows do not have the same ease of access to the other departmental libraries as do Museum staff.

Hurrah for the digital age! On line access has simplified the task of rationalisation considerably. For the first time this year each departmental library has been persuaded to give up a small portion of its total budget to augment a central pot of money used to buy on-line resources. We still have the problem of who should hold the hard copy, but the battle loses its intensity when anyone can access journal articles from their office and, thanks to the wonders of Athens or Shibboleth, from home or out in the field.

Situated as we are in the heart of academic London, we have another potentially very large group of readers in students reading anthropology. Every November, during the reading week of the Michaelmas term, we hold an Open Day to introduce new students to the Library. Alas, this very rarely attracts more than a small percentage.

How much of the under usage of the Centre can be attributed to our lack of an on-line catalogue, advertising, not just our presence, but also the size and breadth of our collection is hard to say. It is certainly true that one local anthropology lecturer has been known to tell his students not to bother with the Anthropology Library because we don't have an online catalogue – a very odd attitude when we have OPACs, a team of helpful staff and a very much larger anthropology collection than the organisation concerned, just a very short walk away.

Finally, the Library forms the heart of the Centre for Anthropology, so my brief is slightly wider than looking after the Anthropology Library and the departmental libraries and offers the opportunity to host seminars for the wider academic community. In my short sojourn at the Museum these have been on subjects as diverse as the deciphering of Mayan hieroglyphics and the anthropology of prostitution.

It is this diversity, together with the sheer excitement of belonging to the whole Museum community, which keeps us going through the frustrations of limited funding and the glacial slowness of making change happen.

In 250 exciting years what is a mere decade of frustration?