

PRESENT, PAST AND FUTURE

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Introduction - The Present

For my contribution to this meeting, which is considering the future of collection development and libraries, I would like to look at where we are now in the present, where we have been in the past and where are we going to in the future. I start with a quotation from Dante Alighieri, famous son of Florence, his opening words of the *Divina Commedia*.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita

This could be roughly translated as the expression of Dante's mid-life crisis – "In the middle of my walk through life I found myself in a dark wood, where the straight path was lost". I use this quotation not just to situate ourselves in Italy and Europe where we are for this meeting, but also to shed some light on our current predicament at the end of the 20th century. We do find ourselves in the middle of some kind of dark wood where the way out is not at all clear. We face all kinds of challenges in our libraries which require careful thought, but for which we are given little time as so much is changing around us. As Bertold Brecht noticed, just because things are like this now, they won't stay that way because my friend, everything is in motion.

Aber jetzt heisst es: da es so ist, bleibt es nicht so.
Denn alles bewegt sich, mein Freund.

The Past

It seems pertinent here to say a little about the library in which I work. The Taylor Institution Library is the major research library in the University of Oxford for the study of the literature and languages of all European countries (except England) wherever they occur in the world. By the way I use the word England advisedly and not the United Kingdom, as within our islands we have many languages other than English, and these do form part of our collections. The Library is part of an Institution funded under the will of the architect Sir Robert Taylor and is currently celebrating its 150th anniversary. The Library itself opened in 1849 with a Librarian, John Macray, who was paid a salary of £150 and was given a book budget of £100 (\$62.50). The whole building cost £54,197 (\$34,000) to put up and the Library fittings, which are very attractive, cost £2,797 (\$1800). It was planned by means of the first ever architectural competition in Oxford which was won by Charles Cockerell and represents the late

flowering of the neo-classical style; a new institution to study European languages in an old-style building. Mr Macray was required to be resident in the building and not to leave Oxford without permission of the Curators. His major duties were To deliver out and enter the books, as delivered, in a register. This was the original form of catalogue. Books were not allowed to be borrowed until several years later in 1856. His other major duty was To go every evening through the Building, to see that all lights and fires have been extinguished. Without electricity the Library was only open in the hours of daylight. A trawl through the history provides some interesting notes, such as the discussion on enhancing the “stipend of the Library girl” in 1954. I am only the sixth Taylor Librarian in 150 years – a remarkable record for my predecessors. Things have of course changed since 1849 when the Library opened, but changes always have to build on existing structures both physical and bureaucratic. We now serve the largest Modern Languages Faculty in the U.K. as well as many outside users, and have the largest single collection of European literature in the UK. Some of our more famous visitors have been David Livingstone, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mallarme, Gide, Cocteau, Neruda, Borges, Calvino, Croce and Octavio Paz. Robert Frost gave a public reading of his poetry in 1957 in the lecture hall but we do not know if he set foot in the library. We have very good modern collections, but also many special collections including a large collection on Voltaire and the Enlightenment, with the biggest collection of *Candide* editions in captivity. As *Candide*’s tutor Pangloss might say we are in the best of all possible worlds:

“le meilleur des mondes possibles”

But are we really in the best of all possible worlds? We are based in our particular historical context, but we are also faced with considering what our library users want and what we must do to serve them. As *Candide* himself suggested we should continue to cultivate our gardens.

The Present - What Do Users Want?

What our users want, and this information is gathered from surveys, is the ability to be able to find and obtain relevant and timely information. They want to be able to identify the best source for their information. They want to know what’s new and they want 24 hour desktop access. Along with this they want to feel themselves to be in familiar surroundings, with peace and quiet, with no rules and regulations, particularly no computer generated overdue notices, and finding a “human touch”. In the Taylor Institution Library (and reproduced on our Internet Homepage) we have a letter written by Emile Zola in 1879 to a friend in which he says:

Comme ça après moi! Je suis bien tranquillement au travail ici.

I like to think that Zola, who describes himself as being quietly comfortable in his work, might have found the Taylor Institution Library just the place for writing. But nowadays he would need to use the Internet in our reading rooms, as well as reading print. Are we confident that we can make predictions about our collections 120 years hence, or are we a little complacent about it all remaining the same after we are gone?

The Present – What Do Users Get?

Even if we know what our users want what is it we give them? I would contend that we librarians have a tendency to give them what we decide to give them, starting from our own knowledge base and taking little or no account of their knowledge. We respond to current concerns while still trying to run along old lines. We respond to requests, when they suit our plans, and we compete with each other to provide a service. As Sartre said:

L'enfer c'est les autres

Dante found that Hell was full of other people, while we librarians believe that Hell is the other people. Some of us are in some ways forced to live in the past, in our elderly but imposing buildings. We try to incorporate new technology with greater or lesser degrees of success. We claim that we never have enough staff or enough materials and that we suffer from small budgets. Most of all we are surrounded by accretions of rules and regulations.

The Future?

The problem for librarians is that we have always been in the prediction business. We predict what collections we need and as we know from the collections we inherit librarians do not always make the right choices. We make assumptions. Has the book about the book being dead really been published?

To digress for a short while on predictions and assumptions, the publicity for this meeting contained the ominous words:

not all rooms are equipped with private baths. Remember: it's Europe!

Now how did that make us dirty Europeans feel? And what a quick turnaround in history from the comment in the New York Times of 1841 (just before the Taylor Library opened):

The bathtub is an epicurean innovation from England designed to corrupt the democratic simplicity of the republic.

Let us turn now to predictions which are closer to us both in time and concern. Here's one from Popular Mechanics in 1949, a mere 50 years ago:

Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons.

Here's an even more recent one (1977) on computers from Ken Olson, the founder of Digital Equipment Corporation:

There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.

And here is one which is astonishing given the listening predilections of my teenage son, and perhaps one which has hindered music library collections. Decca Recording Company said of The Beatles in 1962:

We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.

Libraries for the Future

Our challenge now is to build collections (and libraries) for the new Millennium. If it is true that the Millennium is as the dictionary says "the supposed coming time of happiness on earth" what are we doing to provide happy libraries for the future? What qualities do we need as librarians? I think we need to have a sense of context, acknowledging the history of our collections. We need to be curious both about the past and about the future, to help us understand what we need to provide. We need to challenge the present norms of collection development and management if we are to provide for the future. We must remember that information needs to be available for all, not just the privileged few. As Cervantes noted through the character of Sancho Panza:

Dos linajes solos hay en el mundo – que son el tener y el no tener

There are only two kinds of families in the world, the have's and the have not's. We need to have some understanding of the context we work in – in my case higher education and research. As Bill Bryson, an American writer who is very popular in the UK, has said about Oxford University:

I have the greatest respect for the university and its 800 years of tireless intellectual toil, but I must confess that I'm not entirely clear what it's for

We need a sense of purpose, confidence in what we are doing, and from where I'm standing we will always need a sense of humour. Without that, the entrance to our libraries might as well carry the same despairing message as the entrance to Dante's Inferno:

lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.