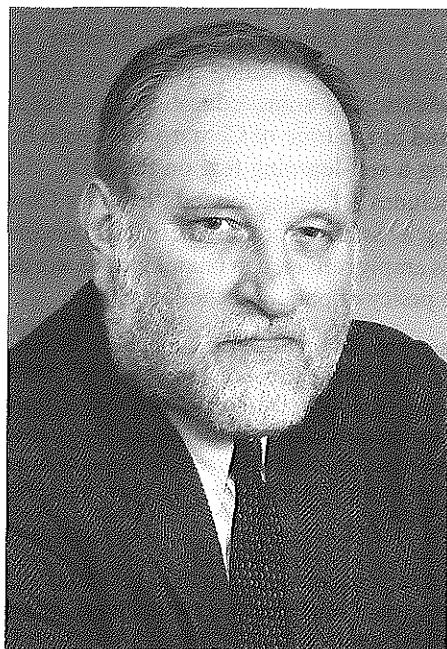

Obituary

John Phillip Comaromi, 1937-1991 In Memoriam

John Phillip Comaromi was born on the 4th April, 1937, in Flint, Michigan. His forefather was an Austrian orphan adopted by a Hungarian gentleman, Michael Komaromy, hence his name which was later changed into Comaromi. John Phillip studied Chemical Engineering at North-Western University during 1955-1956 and later in 1958-1959 joined Flint Junior College to study English. He obtained an AB degree in English from Flint College, University of Michigan, in 1961 and ultimately an M.A. in English in 1964-1965. He obtained his MLS from the University of Michigan during 1961-1964, and ultimately his Ph.D. in 1969 from Michigan. He had a great fondness for his Alma Mater. For many years, he donated a cash award to an outstanding Michigan graduate in Cataloguing and Classification. In 1990, the School honoured him as its Distinguished Alumnus, and he was also its national chairman for its annual fund-raising drive. During the early 1960s he worked in smaller libraries at Flint and Flushing. During 1966-1968 he was a member of the Library School Faculty of the University of Michigan and later served as an Assistant Professor at the Library School of the University of Oregon from 1969-1973. Later he joined UCLA till 1980 to eventually reach his professional destination as Editor of the DDC at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

He died suddenly on 6 November 1991 at his residence at Bethesda, Maryland, leaving his family, friends, and admirers in a state of sudden shock and gloom. By his premature demise the DDC family has lost a pillar of strength and a most valued expert. He amply demonstrated a vision and capacity to take the DDC to still greater heights from the high level he inherited from his illustrious predecessor Benjamin A. Custer. He had an enormous and challenging task on his hands: to take the DDC into the 21st century in such a period of transition for the science of classification. The DDC witnessed very exciting events and developments during his relatively short tenure although his overall association with the DDC was long and varied.

He earned his doctorate from the University of Michigan in 1969 on a broadly and deeply researched history of the DDC. His dissertation was later published as the famous and classic work: *The Eighteen Editions of the DDC*, published by Forest Press as a part of the worldwide centenary celebrations of the DDC in 1976. It is a readable epitome with lurid details and incisive commentary on men and events. In it he vividly captures



some moments of high drama of the eventful story. The history of the last two editions was described by him in an essay for the Kathryn Henderson Festschrift. In 1974 he was the principal investigator for a detailed survey of the use of the DDC in the US and Canada. He drew many practical conclusions from this survey, which were tangibly reflected in the 20th edition (1989) of the DDC. He served as a member of the Editorial Policy Committee of the DDC (DCEPC) from 1973-1976, as its chairman from 1976-1979 and finally became its Chief Editor in March 1980. The only editions completed under his editorial direction are the 20th (1989) and the Abridged DDC-12 (1990); and he was already in the thick of his work on the 21st edition tentatively scheduled to be published in 1997. *Inter alia* he was learning the new software for editing the DDC, which replaces the ESS installed in 1984. The great success of the 20th edition is a tribute to his vision, skill, and dedicated devotion. He leaves the DDC with higher standards of editing and as a better tool for his successor to carry on. The lessons he learnt from his survey of the DDC in the US and Canada are well incorporated in the 20th edition of the DDC. These include a first independent preparation of the Manual on the use of DDC (Forest Press, 1982), complete with maps and flow charts; it later became an integral and much valued part of the DDC-20. The Editor's introduction was greatly simplified to the liking of all. The index to the DDC-20 is better than the earlier one, though smaller than Comaromi desired. It lists 10% more concepts despite a 40% reduction in size and is far simpler to operate - that is Comaromi. The Abridged DDC-12 (1990) is fuller than the 15th Standard Edition (1951) and fuller than more than a third of all the unabridged editions. Comaromi named it Colossus. It was hailed as a significant improvement over the previous editions. His concern for the reader's convenience is

manifested in over 50 all-day workshops for over a thousand cataloguers in the US and Canada to promote the uniformity and unambiguous use of the DDC. His talks were lively, humorous and informative, for he was a proficient and entertaining speaker. In 1991 they lead the production of some educational packages on the DDC, and at the time of Comaromi's death he was co-authoring a self-learning text on the DDC. Since 1990 DC& includes a feature named "Editor's Choice" and providing assistance for classifiers. His concern for the reader is amply reflected in unambiguous words castigating the policy of phoenix schedules:

...gradualism would have been a better policy...that is, revise on all fronts that need it, but do so slowly, to the end both librarians and the public can handle with aplomb the vibrations that set their intellectual order to shaking. Do not toss an entire discipline in the air only to reassemble its parts into a new but dubious structure (which seems to have been the case in Editions 17-20).

His other major works include two student texts on the DDC: one (1987) for the 19th edition, and the other (1990) for the 20th edition, both written with M.P.Satija, a revision of Jean Osborn's book (1991) on the DDC-20 and a Book Number text (1982) explaining in detail the LC shelflisting practices.

He had unlimited confidence in himself and in his work. At times he appeared opinionated on the verge of being dogmatic. But that is true of every strong and original mind like his. This caused conflicts with some colleagues who differed from him. He even never hesitated to criticize the DDC for its faults, giving credit instead to other rival systems where due. Nevertheless he provided unstinted support and encouragement to his colleagues and friends. He wrote less outside the DDC; ironically his last piece was for a Ranganathan birth centenary volume wherein he paid rich tribute to S.R.Ranganathan (1892-1972), dwelling on his subtle influence on the DDC. After the release of DDC-20 and Abridged DDC-12 he became quite prolific even to the

point of getting overworked.

Everything he wrote is characteristically seminal and elemental, and he always easily reached the heart of the matter. He will be remembered as a potent brain and a fundamentalist mind that engaged in the study of classification. His prose was axiomatic and pithy with immense literary richness. He had an abiding interest in English literature, and could also read and write German, French and Spanish.

As a person he was warm and witty, though the inherited fear of death always haunted him. In response to my greetings on his 45th birthday he wrote "Had I known I was to live so long, I should have taken better care of my health". In 1987, when his office was bifurcated with the post of the Chief of the Decimal Classification Division going to David A.Smith, he humorously wrote that he had lost his parking place. He had premonitions of his early death or had it in his mind. In his letter of December 1990 he wrote that "I am tired ... I would like to go home. Buy the graves and care for my elderly family. But I suppose I am stuck in this unfeeling place for ever". His concern for his friends and family was immense. In February 1991, on the 25th birthday of his elder son he wrote me, "I feel both proud and old".

He had a rare privilege, first being a detached historian of DDC and later a dramatic persona on the central stage of the DDC history. Brilliance and excellence are the hall-marks of both these roles of his. Intensity characterized both his life and his work. We are too close to him to say how history will place him. But every new DDC historian will find him/herself standing on his shoulders, and nobody will deny the towering intellect he was graced with, and his lasting impact on the science of knowledge organization.

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