Knowl. Org. 37(2010)No.3
Brian Vickery. 11th September 1918-17th October 2009

155

Brian Vickery
11ᵗʰ September 1918-17ᵗʰ October 2009

The death of Brian Vickery sees a great era of classification research coming towards an end. Born in Australia, he completed his schooling in England, before going up to Brasenose to read Chemistry just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Brian was never in the services, but after Oxford he worked as a chemist in the Royal Ordnance Factory from 1941-45. After the War he became a librarian at Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). He was a delegate at the Royal Society Scientific Information Conference held in 1948. One of the offshoots of that conference was the formation of a small committee of scientists under the leadership of Professor J.D. Bernal, to make a study of library classification. After two years of discussions, they elicited the assistance of Jack Wells, then editor of the *British National Bibliography*, and Brian. They circularized a group of colleagues and convened a meeting in February 1952 which led to the formation of the Classification Research Group. As is well known, this Group, all practising librarians, were to exert a groundbreaking influence on the organization and retrieval of information.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he participated fully in the Group's activities. Among its number were many of the famous names that laid the foundations of future work on classification and knowledge organization in general, including Jack Mills, Douglas Foskett, Jason Farradane, Robert Fairthorne, Eric Coates, Jack Wells, Bernard Palmer, Barbara Kyle and Derek Langridge. Three of them, Langridge, Foskett and Vickery himself, were between 1958 (Vickery) and 1973 to write the series published by Butterworths on classification and indexing in major fields of knowledge: *Classification and indexing in the sciences* (Vickery), *Classification and indexing in the social sciences* (Foskett) and *Classification and indexing in the humanities* (Langridge).The Group met monthly and its members, (notably at that time, all practising librarians) including Brian, produced a number of special classifications based on the principles that they tabulated. These were expounded in his admirable, brief but exceedingly clear *Faceted classification* published by Aslib in 1960. Over this period he was a regular contributor to the *Journal of Documentation* writing, among many contributions, a memorable series on notation. The *J Doc* was subsequently to honour him with a Festschrift in 1988, which includes a bibliography of his writings by Harry East, who was one of the team of researchers he brought to University College.

Towards the close of the 1950s his interests were drawn more and more towards the problems of information retrieval in general, rather than classification specifically. In 1958 he was invited to the International Conference on Scientific Information, in Washington, and this further stimulated his thinking, one result of which was his book *On retrieval system theory*, published in 1961. At this time, he moved from ICI to become deputy to Donald Urquhart, at the fledgling National Lending Library for Science and Technology (later the NLL), set up in 1962,. He remained there until the mid 1960s when he was appointed Librarian of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), now part of that University but at that time a separate institution. He was not destined to remain there long, for in 1966 he moved to Aslib, in charge of Research and Consultancy. This responsibility for research was concentrated on projects that needed to be achieved for a specific purpose, rather than "blue sky research." Among projects then undertaken, was a review of the available general schemes of classification, with a view to selecting the one most appropriate for the Reading Room of the new British Library. The aim was to use one scheme for the amalgamated services, to be brought together in the new Library, previously separately constituted as the British National Bibliography using the DDC, the British Museum Reading Room which used its own scheme and the Science Reference Library which used the UDC and its own classification devised by Sandison, yet another member of the CRG. The resulting report provides a clear summary of the strengths and weaknesses of all the competing schemes, an excellent source for collecting thoughts at the conclusion of a course on library classification for students.

156

Knowl. Org. 37(2010)No.3
Brian Vickery. 11th September 1918-17th October 2009

In 1973 he left Aslib to become Professor of Library Studies and Director of the School of Librarianship and Archives at University College London. The School at that time was still in the process of adjusting to offering Masters courses and research degrees, an innovation in 1968, before which date it had offered an Academic Postgraduate Diploma only. It had a small staff of seven, including the Director, and offered courses in Archive Administration as well as Library Studies. The word Information was soon added to its title, invariably abbreviated by Vickery to SLAIS, an acronym which remained until 2009 when it became the Department of Information Studies. Vickery was instrumental in setting up a proper research programme, for which he obtained government grants to support a full-time research team. This attracted doctoral students, many of whom he supervised. It also attracted grants and enabled him to assemble a team of researchers, establishing a research environment nowadays taken for granted in a department of library studies, but a novelty at the time. He took an active role in working with all the students, participated in interviewing applicants, and taught the course in Library History, though he eschewed any teaching on the classification and retrieval course. His BL report clearly left its mark, for he was of the opinion that the students needed only to study Dewey. He instituted regular staff meetings and this enabled him to demonstrate his skill in drawing together clearly and succinctly the results of often woolly discussions. This gift remained with him in retirement, and was amply demonstrated in his concluding address at the "Dorking Revisited" conference at University College London in 1997. He introduced computers to the department and endeavoured to bring it into the late 20th century. During his time at the College, the School added to its courses an MA in Scientific Information and one for teacher librarians. It also offered an optional course as part of the College's BSc general degree. This was eventually to become a full undergraduate degree in Information Management, but that was some ten years later. His own research was closely linked to the work of his wife who was in charge of Information Systems at the University of London Library.

This link continued in his retirement from 1983 when the two of them worked on a project to devise some intelligent information software, as an aid to inexperienced searchers, originally funded by BLRRD, but later developed into a commercial enterprise, which they named Tome Searcher. This ended in the early 1990s, but while involved with it he was also at work writing another book, *Information science in theory and practice* (1987). His last book in the field was written towards the end of the century, *Scientific communication in history* (2000). He remained active to the last, and returned to the College in June 2008 to address the UK Chapter of ISKO. He attended several meetings of the Chapter, of which he was an honorary member, and was also responsible for reviewing some of the papers for the Rome Conference held earlier this year. His clear thinking and wide reading were always greatly appreciated by his staff at UCL and the College was fortunate to have so distinguished a classificationist as the Director of the School for 10 years. He will be remembered above all for his major contribution to the field of Knowledge Organization, a field of study of which he was in many ways an originator.

I.C. McIlwaine
University College London