

Biography

Madelaine Dennison, BSocSC MCLIP ALAI, has held the post of Head of Library and Research Services in the Houses of the Oireachtas since November 2005. In this role she has led the expansion and development of the parliamentary library including the establishment of research services for members and committees. Madelaine previously held the post of Law Librarian/Information Manager in the Office of the Attorney General, Dublin. Prior to that she worked for KPMG in Dublin where she was responsible for delivering business information services to both the firm and its clients.

Legal Information Management, 11 (2011), pp. 181–184
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doi:10.1017/S1472669611000594

Reflections from George Woodman, MBE

Abstract: This article takes the form of a short interview with George Woodman, Librarian at the Northern Ireland Assembly Library. The questions were posed by the LIM Editor. George was recently given Life Membership of BIALL and received the Wildy BIALL Law Librarian of the Year 2011 Award at the 2011 BIALL Annual Dinner in Newcastle. More significantly, George was awarded an MBE in HM The Queen's Birthday Honours 2010 in recognition of his services to the profession.

Keywords: parliament; information services; Northern Ireland

Since your article for the Law Librarian in Sept 1996, in which you provided an outline of the work of the library at the Northern Ireland Assembly, what have been the greatest changes to, and challenges for, the library service in that time?

Of course the return of devolution to Northern Ireland changed everything but this is a separate topic and I shall consider wider developments here. The most important changes have resulted from the major developments in online services and the Internet. In 1996 the Internet did not feature in the work of the Library as it contained virtually no materials relating to Northern Ireland. This started to change in 1997 when Northern Ireland legislation first appeared on the Her Majesty's Stationery Office website. A few years later Google revolutionised access. Now the range of material accessible both freely through the web and through commercial databases is enormous and the majority of inquiries are

answered through electronic sources. At the same time the development first of electronic communications and then of social networking have increased the ways in which a library and its collections can be accessed and raised the expectations of clients.

In all this there are many challenges. In the 1980s, when online searching started for most of us, cost was an overriding concern. One was always aware of how much it cost per minute to stay online. As a result, one did a great deal of work before going online working out precisely what was wanted and the best searching strategy. I am now glad of this discipline when I search the Internet. Now that electronic access has become commonplace my experience is that people do not know how to ask the right questions to make the best use of the vast inchoate resource that is the Internet and that the major contribution librarians can make is through their ability to do this. Paradoxically, the traditional skills of a librarian are more important than ever in an

electronic age. One negative aspect of the Internet is the absence of context. It is often not clear where something comes from, who has produced it or how it fits in with other things. So librarians can look at a website and adopt the cataloguer's approach, asking questions like: 'What is here?' 'Who has written this and who is publishing it and what interest group do they represent?' Balancing these skills with the range of technical knowledge and understanding the new media require and clients expect is (for me at least) a challenge.

Legislation represents one area where context is particularly important and it can be a task to explain to people whose first encounter with it is electronic both what the text does and how it all fits together. One often has to convince people that not everything- especially in legal materials- is available electronically. Indeed, while we get fewer of the very routine queries that were commonplace in earlier years, as the information can be found quite effectively through Google, inquiries for older material, often not available online, assume greater importance. For me personally the great example here is in the large area of local and private legislation, of which we have the only substantial collection in Northern Ireland.

There are administrative challenges from the new media as well. It becomes harder to justify the maintenance of physical resources. Increasingly the library matters less as a physical space and even as a collection, since the Library cannot claim ownership of many of the materials used. A challenge is how to create or recreate an actual community out of what can turn into a virtual one. In my first permanent job, many years ago, in a university library, I worked mainly in the cataloguing department. I spent much of my day checking entries at that card catalogue. I now recognize this as a valuable experience. I met readers and helped them. The issue desk staff would see me and ask for my help. I was interacting all the time and it all helped to make the library a community, like the libraries I myself experienced as a student, where work was at the centre, but where round the fringes of the work people socialized, indeed flirted. Both in terms of the work and the wider institution, libraries formed a valuable social function for the institutions they served as well as an intellectual one. In the same way the libraries in law firms were the place where junior members could bemoan their treatment by the partners! How do you recreate this? Perhaps you can't but at least one should be aware of exactly what is lost in the function that libraries can perform.

How have the changes in the political situation, together with devolution in NI, affected your work and the work of the library in general?

I took up my post in September 1981, as the first professional librarian to work there, and since then my work and the direction it took have been conditioned by political developments in Northern Ireland. The common factor was uncertainty about the future. Even if its

operation was suspended for over 25 years, the government of Northern Ireland consisted of an Assembly with an Executive elected by, and from, the Members, and restoration of the devolved institutions was the constant aim of British governments of all parties. It has to be said that there were times when it was difficult to maintain the faith that this restoration would ever happen. However, it did!

My first experience of work with elected representatives derived from one attempt to bring back devolution. The Northern Ireland Assembly that existed from 1982 to 1986 was set up through the initiative of James Prior when he was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It had scrutiny, but not legislative powers. The intention was for these to develop out of the process of working together as a scrutiny body. This initiative never commanded the level of community support needed to operate devolved institutions but useful work was done and in terms of the experience I gained it was certainly very valuable to me. I also learnt to search online at this time with the POLIS database, as it was being developed by the House of Commons Library. I was able to start building up the library stock, something that I was able to continue to do after 1986.

In the years that followed, from 1986 to 1998, devolution in Northern Ireland seemed a remote prospect. The continued existence of the Library during the years of Direct Rule was a signal that government in Westminster was committed to the restoration of devolution. My primary responsibility was to maintain the collections for the day that this happened. In practice the Library worked as a reference library for government departments. (It also provided a reference service to the ultimately unsuccessful rounds of inter-party talks that took place between 1990 and 1992. These allowed me to maintain and build on relations with local political representatives built up in earlier years.) The day to day work was interesting and it was through this work that much of my knowledge of legislation was built up. It was at this time that I also began writing about legislation. However, one never knew when or how the situation might change radically.

This radical change happened in 1998 with the Belfast Agreement and the creation of a new Northern Ireland Assembly. The work of the Library was transformed. There was a completely new group of clients, with 108 Members, the personal staff they brought with them, and the large staff of the secretariat who made the Assembly function. From the year 2000 the staff of the Library expanded. From being in charge of a small unit I found myself one of four librarians with a larger number of assistant librarians. The Library is part of a unit with the Assembly's research department and much of the day to day work is co-ordinated with theirs. Members frequently ask for the sort of detailed information that requires processing where librarians and researchers can usefully complement each other in what they do. The technical changes outlined in answer to the previous



George Woodman (right) with John Sinkins, Managing Director of Wildys Sons Ltd., at the BIALL Annual Dinner in Newcastle.

question took place against this background. Important elements in the work of the Library now are the preparation of information packs for members on topics being discussed and the production of *Horizon*, the innovative current awareness service through which the Library meets the challenges of the most recent electronic media. On *Horizon* researchers and library staff work together to provide Members and staff of the Assembly with the information included in a careful selection from the latest electronic publications. I should say that my own involvement in this project is limited to supplying material.

The Library has expanded its operations beyond its own premises to cover visits to staff in Members' constituency officers to introduce its services. It also plays its part in the Assembly's outreach to the wider community. I look after the Library's Deposited Papers collection. These are mainly documents containing information supplied by Ministers in answer to questions in the Assembly and their being placed in the Library constitutes publication. It is my function, with colleagues, to see that they are made available publicly through the Assembly website.

In conclusion, while uncertainty about the future did not cease with 1998, devolution now is an established part of the scene in a way no one could have envisaged 20 or even ten years ago, so that today there is less feeling of uncertainty about the future than I can ever remember!

Are there any aspects of your 2001 LIM article¹, written in relation to the legislative process in NI, where you could update us on developments?

This article was written very early in the life of the Assembly and I remember having trouble finding a

'typical' Bill to use as an example! However, the procedures have not changed and the process of passing a Bill through the Assembly is still the same as set out in the article. There are, however, three developments I should note:

On 12 April 2010 the great majority of powers over policing and justice were devolved to the Assembly. A new Department of Justice was created with an additional minister in the Executive. This means that more legislation passes through the Assembly and that there is now little occasion to use the still existing Order in Council procedure.

New legislation passed by the Assembly now appears on the Northern Ireland pages of www.legislation.gov.uk.

The *Northern Ireland Assembly Weekly Information Bulletin* has ceased publication. Information on the passage of Bills can now be found through the legislation part of 'The Work of the Assembly' on the Assembly website.

Could you explain the importance of the work to digitise the Stormont Papers?

The Stormont Papers is a website which so far contains the text of The Northern Ireland House of Commons debates from 1921 until its prorogation in 1972. The debates of the Senate, the upper house of the Northern Ireland Parliament, have been added to the site and will shortly be made public. It is hoped to add the debates of the Northern Ireland Assemblies of the 1970s and 1980s. Hard copies of this material are now not common within Northern Ireland and very rare indeed outside it. For years I regularly received requests from people outside Northern Ireland for advice about where they could be found. This material is valuable not only for people

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researching the history of Northern Ireland but also as, now that devolution is a factor in wider United Kingdom politics, the one place where its operation in individual policy areas over a long period can be studied. Incidentally, the presence of the Senate Debates on the site will make possible complete 'Pepper v. Hart' searches through debates on older Northern Ireland legislation. It is my hope that the project will develop beyond the Debates and the various numbered series of Stormont parliamentary papers, i.e. Northern Ireland Command Papers and others, will be digitised, as has happened with Westminster papers. The reports that appeared in these series are a very important historical resource and hardly a week goes by without my receiving queries which demonstrate how valuable their presence on the web would be!

Do you have any reflections on the 'Law Library' profession that you would like to share with us?

I have to watch my words carefully here as, while I work with legal materials I am not exclusively a law librarian! I started off working with our collection of legislation, having little previous experience and limited knowledge. (The library I had worked in, although it had legislation, did not have a law school.) I was fortunate in my early days to receive the patient advice of such people as John Smyth, editor of the *Northern Ireland Statutes Revised* and Ralph Erskine, long time

Senior Legislative Council of Northern Ireland. It was my friend Mandy McIlveen, for many years librarian of the Law Society of Northern Ireland who introduced me to the world of law librarianship- and indeed to BIALL. Mandy's enthusiasm and professionalism served as a standard for the qualities I have met in the wider community of law librarians. They have been a very welcoming group. I am struck by the way the sector has developed. When I was at library school in Aberystwyth in 1975-76 no one suggested to us the option of working for a solicitor's firm. (Perhaps it should be said that Sheffield University library school was the pioneer in training law librarians- My Trinity College Dublin contemporary Jenny Aston was one of the first students on their course!) Indeed it was not until I joined BIALL that I became aware of librarians working in this way. In many ways law librarians were the group in the library profession who adapted best to the private sector culture as it developed from the 1980s. It is to the credit of law librarians and probably to a great extent to BIALL that the different academic, professional and private sector strands cohere as a group and have not disintegrated into factions along private/ public lines. Law librarians come across as having a sense of purpose- perhaps more so than other sectors of librarianship today.

I must say in conclusion that it is a privilege to be part of such a group!

George Woodman

Footnote

¹Woodman, George. The Legislative process in the Northern Ireland Assembly. *Legal Information Management* Vol 1(1) 2001, pp. 43-46.

Biography

George Woodman, MBE has been Librarian at the Northern Ireland Assembly Library since 1981. He is an expert in Irish legislation and has an acute understanding of the developments of the law of Northern Ireland. He has published widely on issues connected with the N.I. Assembly and been involved with the digitization of the Stormont Papers, an archive of 92,000 pages that cover and document the history of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1972.