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# In memoriam

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This note pays tribute to two distinguished Librarians who, in different ways, played a major part in SCONUL during their professional lives, and it is fitting that they should be linked in this tribute, having died within weeks of each other late last year.

## Ogilvie MacKenna

Robert Ogilvie MacKenna (University Librarian at Glasgow University 1951-1978), who died in December 2004, was a graduate of the University. He graduated in classics, though in a typically self-deprecating way, said that the reason he got a First was that the weather was too bad to play cricket and the only alternative was revision. His cultured and wide knowledge of literature and music remained with him to the end. He won several caps for Scotland at cricket and retained a keen interest in sport and the University's athletic union throughout his life. Following naval service during the war, he returned to Glasgow in 1951, after spells at Leeds and as Librarian of King's College, Newcastle.

His achievements at Glasgow were threefold. He was one of the first librarians in the university sector to develop a coherent policy of reader service and to adopt the concept of user-focused libraries. In the new library this manifested itself in a system of subject divisions, bringing books, readers and staff together in what were essentially subject libraries within a centralised library. Although much modified now in detailed practice, the 'MacKenna ethos' is still talked of with approbation. The new library itself, built as a high-rise building on a constricted site, was a key achievement, in planning since 1953 and opening in 1968. Though never fully completed to his original plan, it still remains an effective and functional library, and also architecturally striking without challenging the original Gilbert Scott buildings of the University on the Glasgow skyline. In a clear demonstration of his views on user service, every member of staff moved to a new job when they came to the new library, creating a new and improved service at a stroke. His third achievement was the nurturing of staff in a variety of ways. He was an early adopter of the concept of trainees, and Glasgow was always a popular destination because of the quality of training pro-

vided. More publicly, a strikingly large number of his staff went on to become university librarians throughout the UK and beyond. Amongst present SCONUL representatives, Margaret Coutts at Leeds, Robert Butler at Essex and the present author follow in a distinguished line which included Ian Mowat (Edinburgh), Jimmy Thompson (Birmingham), John Simpson (OU), Peter Hoare (Nottingham), Elizabeth Rodger (Sussex), Maurice Line (BL) and Fred Ratcliffe (Cambridge). All those who worked with him remember him with great affection.

Ogilvie MacKenna also has a place in SCONUL history. While at Newcastle, then in a chronological sense the junior of the two divisions of the University of Durham, and aged only 38, he was one of a small group of librarians which discussed the setting up of SCONUL in 1950, and signed the invitation sent to all university, national and some other libraries to its inaugural meeting. At that meeting, incidentally, the membership successfully insisted that the subscription should be raised from the ten shillings and sixpence proposed to one guinea! He applied the same 'change management' principles to SCONUL as he had shown at Glasgow when he became chairman in 1967, initiating a thorough review of its future development, designed to improve its ability to act as the authoritative voice of research libraries in the UK, and emphasising the importance of the national libraries to the overall research library environment. It was he, too, who initiated a survey of periodical price rises and the reporting of the results to the then Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, pioneering the work which led to the library data now published in the HEPPi database and the tradition of engagement with national higher education bodies. His contribution at national level was as important as that at Glasgow.

## Michael Smethurst

One obvious omission from the list of staff above was the name of Michael Smethurst, Librarian at Aberdeen University from 1972 to 1986 and at the British Library from 1986 to 1996, and who was also Deputy Librarian at Glasgow from 1999 to 2002, who died in October 2004.

Mike's career was an unusual one in that he started as a teacher, coming into librarianship as tutor-librarian at Bede College in Durham, and moving to Newcastle when that university was 'the' place for library automation. Later, he would

talk with affection of nights spent in the computing laboratory working with data on tapes which could only be processed out of normal hours. It was a substantial move from the small Institute of Education at Newcastle to the library at Glasgow, but one which he accomplished smoothly. He complemented MacKenna perfectly, sharing his focus on service to users, while bringing a practical knowledge of new developments to the library's thinking. The two understood each other particularly well and remained great friends thereafter. His ability to get things done was a characteristic of his time there, and was to be demonstrated in both his following posts.

His influence at Aberdeen was dramatic. The library in 1972 operated on very traditional lines, and he changed the character of the service completely. He created a new reader services division and gradually built up a team of subject librarians, establishing strong links with academic departments and developing new user-focused services. His knowledge of the possibilities of IT in library work led to the introduction of automation both to circulation and to the production of an automated catalogue in a phenomenally short time. Behind all this was a constant interest in ways in which the services could be improved and the efficiency of library operations increased. He was full of ideas: the trick was to identify those which were really brilliant. Tradition did not set the agenda, and ideas could be tossed around in an open and objective way. Working with him was challenging, but fun. As with MacKenna, he was responsible for a new library, made in this case more difficult by the fact that it had to take the form of a major extension to a building which though relatively modern, was designed in a relatively inflexible manner. Despite these, the resulting library became an effective service to its users.

At Aberdeen, his political skills had been fully demonstrated in his relations with university senior management and his ability to work committees, tempered in sometimes difficult situations. These were to serve him well in the final stages of his career at the British Library, where he held a succession of senior posts, finally retiring in 1996. Here he had to cope with the very different ethos of the civil service world, both in terms of staff and operational changes and in the most difficult period of the development of planning for, and the construction of, the new building at St Pancras. The nature of this project, with arms-length management of construction by the Property Services Agency, made his task

an extremely difficult one. He exercised his roles as a key bridge between the library and the other agencies involved, and between management and staff at a time of considerable financial stringency, with considerable skill and tenacity. The fact that the British Library building is regarded so highly now by its users is to a large extent due to the manner in which Mike Smethurst handled this critical stage in its development, while maintaining and developing services.

Given his experience, it was hardly surprising that Mike Smethurst rose within SCONUL to become its chairman in 1984. What was unusual was that he returned in 1989 for a year to fill a gap, indicating the esteem in which he was held by his colleagues. His strength in committee work was matched by his collaborative mentality, and he was a strong proponent of partnership working between university and national libraries, and this was a theme of his time as chairman of the organisation. This was extended to the international arena, and led to strong engagement with the Research Libraries Group, on whose Board he sat, and the Consortium of European Research Libraries. After retirement, he continued to contribute, most notably as chairman of the expert panel advising the Heritage Lottery Fund on library, museum and archive matters.

On a personal level, a man of great kindness, Mike was also a highly cultured individual. He was a skilled painter, whose Christmas cards were always welcomed by friends, and was heavily involved in the arts in Aberdeen during his time there, with a strong interest in music as well as literature, his original discipline. He is missed by friends and remembered by colleagues for his substantial contribution to the development of libraries, both nationally and beyond, in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Tom Graham