Charles Oppenheim Retires, 2009

1. The early days

For better or worse – and certainly not by design – the early years of my professional life, now some forty years ago, became intertwined with those of Charles Oppenheim. What brought us together was the Diploma in Information Science day-release course at City University, London, UK – yes, we share those ugly Dipl Inf Sc postnomials. The two-year course, which we began in the autumn of 1971, was something of an endurance course, especially for those of us who were carrying out the course while also working at a regular day job.

Charles and I were taught by Jason Farradane, and by staff members that included Penny Yates–Mercer, Barbara Kostrewski and Janet Rennie. They were assisted by external lecturers that included Alexander Gordon–Foster and Felix Liebesny. Farradane at the time was very excited by what became known as the Dainton Report, a Green Paper that laid the foundations for the creation of The British Library soon afterwards. Gordon–Foster no doubt shared this excitement, but we remember him for his passionate interest at the time in rubber magnets; of course he gave us some useful insights into information science too! But it was Liebesny, visiting lecturer on patents, who arguably had the greatest influence on Charles' embryonic career, though in a rather unfortunate and unexpected way.

By way of setting the scene for this unfolding story, I must remind readers that all of this took place pre-computer – we did not get our hands anywhere near computerised databases until Hatfield Polytechnic installed a link to Medline in the mid-1970s. So what could Farradane and Co teach the young Oppenheim about information retrieval under these primitive conditions? As I've

mentioned, we were asked to consider the possible benefits of creating a British Library, bringing together far-flung components such as the Science Museum Library, the Patent Office Library, the National Lending Library and so on. Then there were thesauruses to learn about, and we became familiar with the NLM's MeSH system, among others; that in turn caused us to take an interest in the testing of retrieval systems and indexing languages, and we became very familiar with Cyril Cleverdon's Cranfield Experiments. The exploits of Gerard Salton at Cornell were revealed to us, and Farradane's taste for the exotic launched us into the mathematical world of SR Ranganathan and his faceted classifications. Coming down to earth, we learned everything there was to know about card indexes, debating the relative merits of body punching and edge punching, and arguing the wisdom of using a 74,210 code instead of boring old 7421. Remember, we were only learning about these obscure things because we had no computers.

At this time Charles was tangling with equally primitive systems at Glaxo Holdings, where pride of place in the patents information department was occupied by a massive ICT punched card sorter. To the time spent actually running this machine had to be added a far greater time for wiring up the little metal brushes to represent the Boolean strategy, ferrying heavy trays of cards to and from the sorter bin, and teasing tiny fragments of shredded card from the mechanism every time one was chewed up by the hungry beast.

Back at City, on our day-a-week out of the office, we were given other non-computerised tasks to perform, one of which was to research and write a literature evaluation. Because we were doing full-time jobs at the same time, unlike the MSc students, we were paired up so that the literature searching time could be shared out. So it was logical to pair me, a poor chemist knowing everything

there was to know about sucrose, with Charles, an astonishing chemist knowing everything there was to know about, well, everything. To add realism, we were sent to see a Real User, another aspiring chemist engaged in a PhD project at City. I seem to recall that the subject this student needed evaluated was to do with catalysis, perhaps involving a metal. Whatever the subject, we were going to have to search through the indexes of Chemical Abstracts and maybe some more specialised publications, and we went away to do some digging around, with a view to meeting up again the next week to plan how to share out the various tasks and collate the information. Next week came, and I had a few jottings about where I thought we ought to search, but Charles turned up with the finished Evaluative Report. The sheer energy and enthusiasm of the man was only just dawning on me. We had been given a couple of months to perform the review, and he had done it in a few days. Both of our names went on it, but virtually all of the work was his; I suppose if justice were to be done I should be stripped of my diploma – or maybe the Statute of Limitations would come to my rescue at this late stage.

Had events turned out differently, Charles and I might have gone off after receiving our Diplomas and never met again. But Liebesny unfortunately died very suddenly not long after he had completed his excellent "*Mainly on Patents*" textbook. That left City needing a replacement lecturer, since at that time patents were a major and compulsory element of the postgraduate courses, and Charles stepped in to begin his academic career. That in turn left a hole in Glaxo's IP department, where I arrived in August 1975 to fill the vacant position of information manager. It was soon apparent that I was following in the footsteps of an exceptionally energetic and productive information scientist, spoken of with great affection and some awe by his former colleagues at Glaxo.

Charles moved later to Derwent Publications to work on development projects, and I as a customer continued to interact with him in that role, and over the years we have been on various committees together, including most recently the Editorial Advisory Board of this journal. Colleagues at those meetings hosted by Elsevier have occasionally seemed alarmed at the robust terms in which Charles and I exchange greetings and insults on such encounters, but they quickly realise that it's something that has been going on for quite a time – pretty close to forty years now – and that it has its origins in deep and mutual personal respect.

Mike Blackman has asked Fytton Rowland to relate the later, academic stages of Charles' illustrious career, but I think I am one of a relatively small number who have known him since those fresh-out-of-UMIST days. I'll finish with an anecdote from the late 1970s concerning a close member of his family. A newly-recruited Glaxo colleague, Kathryn Sweet, was trying to work in her office one afternoon when a booming voice from a newly-arrived visitor next door distracted her. Our offices in this former Allen and Hanbury's factory building in Bethnal Green were rather primitive little cubicles separated by frosted glass panels – barely soundproof. Thinking she recognised the voice as that of her former French teacher at Batley Girls' Grammar School, she looked up and saw him silhouetted against the glass – unmistakable. What Kathryn couldn't possibly have known was that her teacher Wally had an identical twin brother working as a lecturer specialising in intellectual property, based in London. Charles had simply popped in to say hello to his former colleagues. I personally find it difficult to accept that someone with the character and enthusiasm of Charles Oppenheim could have a double, but there he is on FaceBook[1] – check for yourself if you doubt me!

Peter Steele, Thomson Reuters, London

2. The Academic

Charles Oppenheim has spent a good proportion of his working life in academia: first as a PhD student in chemistry at UMIST, then in the library at the then Plymouth Polytechnic, and as a lecturer in the Department of Information Science at The City University in London. After a long period working in the information industry, Charles returned to university work when he was appointed Professor and Head of the Department of Information Science at the University of Strathclyde in 1992. His next appointment was at De Montfort University, which at the time had opened a new campus in Milton Keynes and was interested in establishing a library and information science course there. Charles jointly headed up this activity with the well-known humanities computing expert Marilyn Deegan. Sadly, De Montfort's plans did not come to fruition in Milton Keynes, or in the librarianship teaching area, and Charles and his group, now confined to research activities, were transferred to DMU's headquarters in Leicester. In 1997, he applied for and was appointed to a chair at Loughborough University – somewhere, he said, he had long wanted to be. Despite repeated efforts by the current author and others to persuade him to take on the headship of the Department of Information Science there, he resisted until 2006, when he agreed to do the job for a single three-year term before his retirement. Now he has made good his threat, and retired from the headship and from his full-time chair, though he will be continuing on a part-time basis for a while yet, seeing his final Ph.D. students through, finishing work on some research grants, and teaching a couple of modules.

Charles's lifetime publications list contains almost 400 items.[2] I can think of one other member of his generation of British information scientists who exceeds that total, but none who covers such a wide range of topics. His Loughborough University web page lists: 'Legal issues in information work, knowledge management, citation studies, bibliometrics, national information policy, the electronic information and publishing industries, ethical issues, patents information and issues to do with the digital library and the Internet, and the economics of the electronic publishing industries and of electronic libraries'. A good proportion of these 400 papers were co-authored with research students, and he supervised many, always taking the work seriously and giving them much emotional support through the difficult times that almost always come during a Ph.D. His eminence in research led to his being granted a higher doctorate by Loughborough University – one of the first DSc degrees awarded to a British information scientist. This was, of course, primarily a recognition of him personally, but it is also important both for the department, and for the information-science profession in the UK, that he achieved it. In 2002, he was identified as one of the UK's top ten library and information professionals by the *Independent on Sunday*. He was the only one of the ten working in an academic department of library or information science at the time, again confirming his position as the pre-eminent LIS academic of his generation in the UK.

But his research activity, energetic though it has been, has not been at the expense of his teaching. Even when also carrying the burden of headship of the department, he continued to teach a number of modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, and he supervised a large number of master's dissertations and final-year undergraduate projects. He never thought that his position as the department's research star should enable him to slough off these other duties on to his colleagues; quite the reverse, he was one of the most active members of the department in all areas of academic work.

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[1] http://www.facebook.com/people/Wally-Oppenheim/1827510333.

[2] **Editor's note**. Naturally some of these articles appeared in World Patent Information, starting back in the early days of volume 1 in 1979. Oppenheim C, Allen J. World Patent Information, 1979, 1(2), 77–80.

For me, though, as a Loughborough colleague for eleven years, and a friend for three times as long, it is not so much the quantity and quality of his academic work that is so memorable, but the style of it. As a teacher, his enthusiasm for information science is infectious – he can even make copyright or bibliometrics exciting to undergraduates! And as a researcher, his ability to spark off ideas in brainstorming discussions with research associates and PhD students leads to their producing work far better than they thought themselves capable of. From the department's point of view, too, his ability to write convincing research grant proposals has made him the department's main grant-winner throughout his twelve years at Loughborough. At conferences and at editorial board meetings, he is always stimulating and entertaining – one of the liveliest academics around, and always with a grin and a strong sense that academic work is also meant to be fun.

Fytton Rowland, MA PhD, member of the academic staff of the Department of Information Science, Loughborough University, 1989–2008.

3. The Board Member

As is usual on the occasion of the retirement of a major figure in our field, I contacted a number of people who I believed know Charles well. I did not lay down any hard and fast guidelines but looked for responses that, ideally, covered his career well, were interesting and enjoyable.

If you have read this far I am sure that you will agree that the contributions from Peter Steele and Fytton Rowland meet these ideals well and neatly complement each other.

While I have not worked as closely with Charles as Peter and Fytton, I too have known him for many years, dating back to the times in the 1980s when he was working on Derwent, and then Pergamon, databases. At that time I was heavily involved in expanding the use of online searching and information dissemination at the UK-IPO.

After I retired and became your editor, I met up with Charles at an Online Exhibition in London and soon welcomed him as a member of our Editorial Advisory Board, at a time when we were building up a new team of enthusiastic Board members. Of course he came up trumps in this rôle! In addition to enlivening our Board meetings with his interventions, he brought his vast experience to bear on advising us of potential topics and authors, providing other useful contacts, refereeing and preparing book reviews. We will miss both his enthusiasm and his knowledge!

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