

2001 Canadian Librarian of the Year

by David Swords <DSwords@YBP.com>

As summer ALA in Toronto approaches, America's academic librarians will be curious about the issues that confront their Canadian hosts. ATG asked Ernie Ingles, Canadian Librarian of the Year in 2001 and a longstanding force in the profession, if he would talk to us about what he sees. David Swords of YBP Library Services visited Ernie in Edmonton for ATG and filed the interview that follows.

Note from DS: The interview, conducted in late February over dinner at Jack's Grill (one of the best restaurants in North America, I think), began with a conversation about retirement.

EI: I've built a log cabin in the Okanagan Valley. Oh, it's a beautiful part of Canada, and it's very mild in winter. Its winter climate would be probably a lot like Northern California's. It's a rare occasion the temperature falls below 35 to 40 Fahrenheit. It's semi-arid so it's usually in the 90F° plus in the summer. My daughter lives out there as well with her husband, and he has golfed 12 times this year.

ATG: *This year? That's like a miracle.*

EI: God's waiting room is what I call it. There are few drawbacks. One of the great benefits is the wine produced in the area. Superb!

(And we drank a bottle of one of them over dinner.)

ATG: *Now that you bring it up, in the U.S. a lot of librarians are nearing retirement age. Is there talk about the same phenomenon here?*

EI: Very much so. I am heading up a National Strategy for Human Resources, which is a planning coalition of representatives from across the country. We're funded from the Federal Government and from a number of library organizations, including the Canadian Library Association, Canadian Association of Research Libraries, and the Council of Large Urban Public Libraries. The coalition is doing a close study about what the human requirements for libraries are going to look like in the next ten plus years.

ATG: *Any early information?*

EI: We have the same demographics that you have, baby boom demographics. Drilling down a bit from aggregate census data we can see that Canada is actually about two or three years ahead of you, which is to say, we are reaching the retirement bulge a couple of years sooner than the U.S. It's consistent with history. Our boys came home from World War II a bit faster than your boys did and started things going.

We have developed what we call the 8 Rs strategy (and I'm never going to get them all right. We started with 5 Rs then 6 Rs and now it's 8). Let's see, in no particular order, the 8Rs

are Recruitment, Retention, Retirement, Restructuring, Repatriation, Re-accreditation, Remuneration, and Rejuvenation. Did I get all eight? Well, well.

Whatever happens with regard to Recruitment, Retention, Retirement and most of the other Rs, the future probably boils down with some inevitability to Restructuring of how we do things in the our libraries. But let's come back to that. Here are some brief highlights about what each R means.

Remuneration. Our profession lacks the salary scale to encourage recruitment. But what can we do about it? What's the strategy to put in place to try to make participation in the library profession attractive to those who clearly are choosing other careers? We have lost ground here in Canada over the years to other professions, nursing in particular. Our starting salaries for librarians are in the mid to high \$30,000 (Canadian, which is about two-thirds of the U.S. dollar), maybe if you are really lucky in the low \$40s. Nursing graduates are coming out in the low \$50s and moving within nine years, as an example, to the mid 70s. Historically, we were ahead of nursing. The important question is why? Why haven't we been able to demonstrate our value to society? Why are we losing ground?

Repatriation. Over the next five to ten years one of our recruitment strategies has to include repatriation. About 20 to 30% of our library school graduates over the past ten years have gone to the States, to the Middle East, all over. We have to bring them back.

Repatriation goes with **Reaccreditation**. Our birth rate is such that we are going to be a country that relies increasingly on immigration just to keep the population stable, let alone grow it. **Reaccreditation** (the word is kind of a stretch) essentially means that in the past we have been fairly stingy accrediting librarians from countries outside North America. We are looking at reaccrediting librarians from Asia and the Middle East, for example.

Rejuvenation. Essentially how we breathe life into those who have ten years or so left until they retire to obtain what we need from them in terms of professional development and the management of knowledge transfer. You have this big batch of folks moving out, but are we appropriately mentoring and developing those that are coming in as this change quickly overtakes us? We are not looking only at the retirement of librarians in many libraries; support staff has a similar demographic look and feel and is aging pretty quickly as well.

If every library school graduate in Canada stayed in the profession, did not leave the country or stray from the traditional library—which we know never happens, but if they did not become information specialists, knowledge managers, Web designers, and the like, outside tra-

ditional libraries—if this mythical world where they all worked in a traditional box prevailed—we would barely meet 40% of the positions that will be opening up in Canada. Which, as I said, takes us to restructuring.

ATG: *Restructuring is going to be driven by lack of people to do the jobs more than anything else, more than by budget cuts?*

EI: Yes, I think so. Restructuring might mean we still have lots of people, but they will be a much different mix. What today is a professional activity may migrate to a different level of staff, to a para-professional of some kind. We already have seen that in spades over the years in our technical services, but this could accelerate. A lot of libraries still have a high percentage of technical services people who hold an M.L.S. I think there is going to be a trend more to outsource cataloging, that kind of thing. But I think there's also going to be, and we see this already in some of the major research libraries, a move towards what might be called functional specialists, people highly skilled in various areas but who don't have a library degree. We already see some of this in our IT operations, but I expect more of it in some of our traditional areas. It used to be that not very many librarians were in collections; we relied on subject bibliographers who had no library degree, and we probably will again.

ATG: *I'm not going to let you finish with that answer quite yet because it strikes me that you set up a national committee to look at the problem and try to find a national solution. You could say, for example, that Alberta is a rich province and might be able to pay librarians more and so might find its own solution, but are you truly looking for a national solution or will there be provincial ones?*

EI: There are going to be solutions right down to the institution level. But here is an example of why we set up the national committee. What had happened, including in my own library, is that people were running around creating succession plans, the administrative buzzword for a year or two now. It seemed to me that anyone could do a succession plan, but unless you understood the ecosystem within which the individual succession plans lodge, you would be on a fool's errand. To broaden the metaphor, you need to understand how the universe is going to unfold in any sector, and we were woefully lacking in such information. Here's what I mean. Edmonton and Vancouver are served by library schools. We will have less trouble recruiting than jurisdictions without library schools. We'll pick off the best, largely because many come from our area and all things being equal, many will stay. But Canada is vast, and ultimately a domino effect will mean that small rural public libraries will be terribly disadvantaged. So how do you make rational na-

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tional or even regional decisions about how to organize library service? In effect, we need to figure ways to aggregate services regionally. In Canada, we've been "consortia-ed" to death, but I think consortia will have a place in dealing with some of these issues. Put differently, I think we need a roadmap. Many routes exist into the future. The one I think we must examine here begins with our human resources.

ATG: *Can you speak to how the profession might hope to serve those far flung parts of Canada?*

EI: Well, a place to begin is how do you persuade people to live in the north? Can we convince people that this is a profession they want to be in and then find and recruit people who will want to live in those regions? One part of the solution is to recruit aboriginal people to the profession and to provide them with appropriate support.

Obviously, technology must have a role. For a number of years I have been on various committees associated with the development of broadband technology in Canada. A couple of the organizations are imagining what the Internet might be in 10, 15, 20 years. We're talking about a virtual reality cave where you walk in and in real time talk to a fully three dimensional person who is somewhere else. Apply that to the concept of a reference service. It certainly beats a chat line or extended email and is a partial solution to the problem of remoteness.

ATG: *Do you think that librarianship has traditionally attracted a certain type?*

EI: There is certainly a stereotype of librarians, but no one I know seems to fit it. We do have a gender imbalance, and we have a high percentage of people coming to our profession as a second career. The average age in Canada for a librarian starting out is 37. A lot of those folks have cycled through education or some other vocation before finding the light of librarianship. Our demographics are impacted by not having enough people, and given where they are in their lives, we are renting them for only a few years compared with, say, someone coming out of law school at 23, 24 or 25 years old.

ATG: *I might have been a good librarian. But nobody ever told me that being a librarian was an option. I didn't know it existed. How do people find their way to librarianship? Why isn't there someone to say, "You can be good at this?"*

EI: That is a good question; one we need to ask. When I ask the question of librarians their usual answer is "purely by accident." There's the odd person who from grade 6 wanted to be a librarian. But for most, their knowledge of the profession came late in life, quite by accident, possibly through contact with someone who is a librarian.

One of my colleagues, **Mary Jo Romaniuk**, is married to a judge. He has just applied to library school. He is in his mid 40s, learned a

little bit about the profession from Mary Jo, and is going to library school. It's a story that is repeated more times than you probably would believe.

ATG: *So direct influence of one kind or another. How about you, for example? You became a librarian as a young man.*

EI: Relatively, yes in comparison to those demographics. I had gone to university in the 60s, had an interest in history which is my discipline, did an undergraduate, did a masters, began a Ph.D, and then realized that timing was everything. By the time I would have come out, hiring had long since ended; opportunity for history professors had tanked. But as a historian, I had spent a lot of time in the library and a lot of time in archives, so in casting about for what to do with the rest of my life, my first inclination was to become an archivist. But I had a good friend who had become a librarian, and she piqued my interest. I didn't even know there were such things as library schools. The **University of Calgary** didn't have one.

ATG: *Will there necessarily be a more organized way of leading people to library school?*

EI: I don't know. It's a question we are going to ask. It's an interesting question, because it's one of those discussions that I love to get into with friends who are directors of library schools. It's a how-many-angels-can-dance-on-the-head-of-a-pin discussion. I fervently believe that the library schools are the gateway to the profession. But library schools don't see themselves that way. They believe that libraries are the gateways to the profession. We hire people in the library, and then they decide to become career librarians. Few Canadian library schools do any active recruiting. They more or less choose from who comes through the door. Not that they've had a problem filling their spots. There are always more applicants than spaces. Yet, I think how we choose people to come into the profession deserves a deeper look.

ATG: *Will there be more library schools in Canada?*

EI: There might be. There used to be a library school at the **University of Ottawa**. I hear a local movement exists to reinstate it. I haven't heard of much else going on. I'm not sure I would want to see more schools. What I would like to see is an increase in capacity of the schools we have to take more students for a time, to help harmonize supply with what is going to be the demand. But most of the schools are very strapped for space. Even if they wanted to grow, they probably couldn't just because they don't have the space to do it. Of course, there are more of you in California than there are of us up here! We have it a bit easier in that adapting to a problem is much simpler when there are fewer rather than more.

ATG: *The budgets of American academic libraries are suffering right now. Is that true in Canada?*

EI: I think that we've all been there before. These lean times come and they go; they cycle in, they cycle out. But we must look at the long term, avoid saying to ourselves, "I have to give up the positions that I have because of budget

cuts," when the need for those positions hasn't gone away. Eventually you find that you need those people. The pressure to lose positions in the past few years is not necessarily the reality of the future. Part of the problem, in a bizarre way, of our aging staffs was diminished a little by the disintegration of the stock market. It's bought us a bit of time, because peoples' retirement portfolios are not nearly as flush as they were in the dot com boom, and many who might have retired at 55 will go to 60.

ATG: *Besides impending retirements, what are the issues in Canadian librarianship today?*

EI: I'm not sure the trends or issues are fundamentally different from what you would find in the U.S. In many, many areas we are moving, sometimes regrettably, from a paper to an electronic medium. Talk to young folks and they don't want to know how you find anything except on the Internet. Here, the way we have decimated our school libraries over the past 5 to 10 years is a public scandal and outrage. Literally an infrastructure that was one of the best in the world has almost disappeared. School libraries virtually don't exist anymore in this country, and I think that's going to have enormous implications for all of us in the years to come.

ATG: *What were the drivers there? How did this catastrophe happen?*

EI: Money. At the top of it all probably just lack of vision. A lot of jurisdictions formerly were aggregated into central boards of education that tended to manage a central resource library with a whole bunch of schools feeding off of it. Then we moved to school-based decision making and budgeting, where the principal and the school make a decision on how to spend their money as opposed to a board making it. At the school level you have pressures to hire another teacher, to have a basketball team, whatever. As with so many decisions, the library often falls off the end of the pier. And why? Well, of course, we don't need it anymore. It's all on the Internet. This is certainly an unfortunate trend. But we are moving more and more to electronics. Which is no different than you. I think the move to electronics is ultimately going to have a prejudicial effect on the eco-system of libraries. Rather than differentiation, we'll have sameness. Libraries have different personalities, different collection strengths, when you look particularly at academic libraries, but also public ones. Here in Canada we are beginning to license databases nationally, cutting huge license deals, most recently, just before winter **ALA**, with **Elsevier**. All of the **Elsevier** journals are now available to 60-some-odd universities in the country. Everybody has the same thing. So libraries are beginning to look the same; big and small, they are starting down a road of uniformity versus diversity. Which I don't think is all that good, though it's great for smaller libraries that become instantly as good as the bigger ones in certain areas.

ATG: *You've twice used the term library ecosystem. Could you elaborate what you mean by that?*

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EI: It's a metaphor from the biological world, of course. We know from what's happening around us, whether it's global warming from CO2 in the atmosphere or the cutting of the rainforest in Brazil, when you push, punch, or pull at something over here, it will have repercussions over there that you'd never thought of, never anticipated. In any sector, such as the world of information, we often don't understand rippling effects. An example is the many consortia out there locally, regionally, nationally, even internationally, licensing product and thinking that by coming together in a consortial way something wonderful will happen. And something great and wonderful MIGHT happen. We certainly see cost savings.

But I wonder, and here I am far out on a limb. Besides possibly poor management, did **Divine Rowecom** go under because of the pressure libraries wield through consortia? How much of **Rowecom's** failure might have been the result of site licensing, consortia arrangements, eliminating print, claiming, and payments and whatever else squeezes out the middleman? Have we done something to the ecosystem by changing the way we purchase documents, and is it a good thing? I'm not making judgments about it, but we've changed the model and in changing the model have we thought through its impact on the entire ecosystem? Do we librarians in setting up consortia as business-like operations consider the larger implications? If we eliminate intermediaries will it prove a good thing? I'm not sure every time we get a good idea we ask the right questions or whether the short-term solution of saving a few bucks is in our long-term interest.

ATG: *But how can libraries keep larger consequences in mind?*

EI: Haggling over price creates adversaries. We aren't, or shouldn't be, adversaries, inhabiting as we do the same ecosystem. The value-added services of vendors aren't always appreciated until we've lost them, and then it's too late. As I said, you push over here on the ecosystem, and you don't know what's going to pop up over there. We librarians go around in our world and associations doing conferences and seminars and workshops and who do we come to 99 times out of 100 to help support them? Our vendor community, who have been historically absolutely wonderful at supporting us. But, we then turn around and bite the hand that feeds us. Nothing is wrong with the best deal, but the best deal is not only about money. When margins are such that you are barely keeping your nose above water, then we say, "well, their service is terrible and they are not doing anything." But perhaps we've driven you, in large measure, to that. You go under. The next guy goes under. We've got to find an equilibrium where we all feel that there's value that we receive, value when you sell us something, that there's value in the transaction for you, but that the eco-system isn't necessarily eroded. I think that we need to be thoughtful about what we are doing to cause an ever weaker infrastructure of vendors that will be to our detriment. Because

at the other end, the library world hasn't always figured out that we are not the end of the food chain. We are middlemen as well. Lots of publishers would like to go directly to the end user, eliminating the library as well as the **EBSOs, Divines, Yankees**, whoever. We're bulwarks against illiterate nations and together we do add value to the chain. Just buying the cheapest book from the bargain bin at **Chapters** is not the way to go.

ATG: *This is a rich vein. Librarians, you're saying, are middlemen for the culture. They provide a reasonable way of getting to whatever it is that we need to remind us of who we are so that we can become what we want to be.*

EI: Or preserve it in some way that is consistent with a national or international information policy. Generally speaking, in any system, all parts have evolved because they serve a purpose. I fear that consortia introduce an element into the ecosystem whose effects can't be gauged, and I say this as one who has created several consortia that still survive and as a great believer in the cooperative. I'm a great believer in OCLC, for example. Concerning the effects of consortia, we don't have a lot of research to go on; ironically, we're not a research-based industry. In Canada we have created so many consortia that now a lot of them are tripping over each other trying to figure out who's licensing what at which level, local, regional, national, international. You know you've gone too far in an institution when you get a committee of committees. Well, now we have a consortia of consortias, nationally and internationally.

ATG: *Tell me more about your relationships with vendors. You once told someone from YBP that if we wanted to succeed in Canada we needed to be involved in Canada.*

EI: Despite all of this consortia activity and the bulk purchasing and the new systems for approval plans and selections, I believe that libraries should do business with people who are book people, people who are information people. Systems are wonderful as support, but unless you have a relationship between vendor and library that is intimate in the collective understanding about what you are trying to achieve, nothing works. A vendor is not selling books. A vendor should be helping the library shape its collections. The library shouldn't be buying books, but using the value-added expertise of the vendor to shape and grow those collections. I think you must have a relationship with your vendor that's more than discount points or how well they responded to an rfp. The worst thing that ever happened to librarianship was when we were forced by auditors to put out these bloody rfps. I will go to my grave saying, "That was the death of good collection development!" Good collections are built on relationships of book people to book people. We do the rfps because we live in worlds of accountability, of **Enron** and **Worldcom** and all sorts of things like that, but I just don't think they are the best way to run a library.

Many people at the **University of Alberta** are examples of the book people I mean, but let's consider **Merrill Distad**. God bless him, as someone who is creating collections, not buying books. He understands that we are not cre-

ating a collection or buying a book for today; we are buying it for 300, 400, or 500 years from now. And that's how the collections of great libraries are made, no matter how much electronics we have. We had better be able to preserve the human record and the human literature in print form for a long time.

ATG: *Merrill has a national, if not international, reputation.*

EI: Yes, he does, because he's so good at collection development. You should try to see his place. He lives in a library. He's a true book man. You couldn't find a piece of wall in **Merrill's** place here if your life depended on it. He has a huge collection. And he has read them all and remembers them! I have the best library staff in North America and there is absolutely no question about that, and they are book people.

ATG: *Can you give us CLA's perspective on the Toronto conference with ALA?*

EI: In essence, this is an **ALA** conference in Canada that has been allowed to have Canadian content. A year or so ago I was asked to organize the Canadian content of the **ALA/CLA** joint conference, but I won't go into all of its ins and outs. Let me say that **CLA** is struggling because we are not going to have the revenue back from our own conference, which is what we use to support our activities.

ATG: *Is that right? The revenue from this conference is not divided in any way?*

EI: No. **CLA** gets some revenue from **ALA**. The long and the short of it is, we are looking for sponsors of, in essence, **CLA**.

ATG: *What about Due North? First what is it? Second, will it help CLA?*

EI: **Due North** is a two-day pre-conference. I guess our thinking in conceiving **Due North** was that we hoped a group of American librarians would want to come to this country not just to take in another **ALA**, but maybe you might want to come up and learn a little bit about what librarianship is all about in Canada. We hope to inform you, to enlighten you, and to showcase things that we are doing. There might be some American librarians who would want to come up and just learn more about what it is to do good stuff in another country. We Canadians believe a lot of Americans look at Canada as being more of the same. But we are not the 51st state; we do things differently in some degree; and we have some pride in what we are doing. We've got some Canadian content meant to teach a little bit about Canada, not just libraries. We'll have some fun with historical figures. Here, **Benedict Arnold** is a hero because he sided with the British. You, in fact, did lose the War of 1812, even though you think you didn't. And who invented the telephone? Who invented basketball? So, we're going to have some fun. We'll also have some of our more noted Canadian librarians who are very good actors dressing up as historical figures.

At any rate, instead of the revenues from our conference, we're relying on a pre-conference. It's also a risky pre-conference because it is atypical in that most **ALA** pre-conferences are annual events. And in terms of advertising, if you go to the **ALA** Website, which is the only

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website for the joint conference, you will have a tough time finding **Due North** because it has the same profile as all of the other pre-conferences. In short, we gratefully appreciate anything that can be done to promote **Due North**.

ATG: *Can we vendors help? Could we put something on our Websites or send something out to customers?*

EI: You bet. One of the things I think truly regrettable is that a lot of the people coming out of library schools beginning their careers don't understand what the vendor community contributes to libraries and to the profession. I don't mean dollars. Libraries don't create products; we make accessible the products that publishers or suppliers provide to us. We are grocers, who don't pick the peas or can them; we put them on shelves, market them sometimes, and make them available. We are agents of our consumers, but at the same time we have to be prudent agents, as well, of our suppliers. I worry that we understand our customers, but we are losing those linkages back to our suppliers, seeing vendors as vendors, not as partners.

You are part of the ecosystem, the flora and fauna that create the information universe. We seem to stratify importance in the ecosystem in ways unfavorable to you. Too little thought has been given to the relationships that have to exist between equal partners if a system is to make it. 

ATG Note: *Please see the Due North Website at www.cla.ca/duenorth. The pre-conference costs \$150 USD and runs Thursday and Friday June 19 and 20.*