



Brian Perry

Brian Perry, Director of the British Library Research and Development Department (BL R&DD) from 1984 to 1995, died on 1 January 2006, aged 70, after a prolonged illness. Few in the fledgling world

of information science in the 1970s, 80s and 90s have not been influenced by his support, friendship, interest and encouragement. No mere bureaucrat, he was always ready with thoughtful, intelligent advice, and was a major influence in the development of new library and information services, especially in the application of information technology. The worldwide success and reputation of the BL R&DD, and the projects it funded, were largely due to his leadership.

Roots in gardening

Born and brought up in Exmouth, Brian Perry never forgot his roots. He trained in the family business of nursery gardening, before taking a degree at King's College London in biology, specialising in plant taxonomy.

He started in information work as an abstractor and indexer with the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR), and he was a member of the planning body for the National Lending Library for Science and Technology, now part of the British Library. In the early 1960s, he helped set up the DSIR Industrial Liaison Centres, providing scientific, technical and business information to small and medium-sized enterprises, and also set up and ran the DSIR Office for Northeast England. From 1965, he became involved in research funding for library and information science in the Office for Scientific and Technical Information (Osti).

On the death of his mother, he returned to Exmouth in the early 1970s to run a family business, with a reputation built on service. The personal touch acquired came back with him when he rejoined Osti as Deputy Director and assisted in its transfer, in 1975, as the Research and Development Department of the newly-formed British Library, becoming the department's Director in 1984.

Under Brian Perry's direction, the department, unique in the world in its field as a research support body, developed a wide range of programmes. At a time when computing and telecommunications were far less capable and sophisticated than they are today, many of these programmes anticipated the information society, providing data for decisions on provision and form of information services, matching the needs of the communities they served. Experiments in information retrieval, co-operative library networking (especially support of the UK Online Library Network centre), and digitisation of texts and electronic journals, all contributed to the conception and development of what we today know as the internet. Aside from studies with concrete applications in view, he always reserved a part of the budget for basic, 'blue-sky' research, without which,

he believed, the profession would stagnate.

Although most research was undertaken in the academic and public arena, Brian always insisted that commercial service providers should be involved, and their concerns and doubts taken into account. His experience in running a business gave him insight, unusual in a public servant, into the practicality, constraints and risks of exploiting research in the real world. His lifelong love of books made him sympathetic to the publishing and bookselling community, but also prepared to criticise restrictive practices and trade hang-ups. A small group, the BNB Research Fund, chaired by Julian Blackwell, brought together players across the book world and had an influence out of all proportion to the funds dispensed for its projects.

Such was his reputation for sound administration of research programmes, that both the department, and Brian personally, accrued many extra responsibilities during his reign as Director: grants for preserving and cataloguing nationally important library materials; the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust; grants to public libraries on behalf of the (then) Department of National Heritage; BL Consultancy Services and its International Office. His advice was much valued in BL, national and international circles, and he threw his whole-hearted participation into a wide variety of committees and working groups. He was particularly adept at spreading the word abroad through both existing international associations and ad hoc collaborations, such as the Anglo-French and Anglo-Nordic conference series. He reserved particular affection for Japanese colleagues, who held him in a respect amounting almost to awe, and he developed an interest in Buddhist philosophy, reflected in his outlook in later years.

Bibliographic bravura

Never at ease with hands-on aspects of technology, he was nevertheless a great visionary, and fought his corner tenaciously, never afraid to take on experts and push forward with ideas often considered before their time. A typical example of Brian's bravura was his plan to produce Britain's first CD-Rom of bibliographic material. Despite the reluctance of some BL colleagues to release material, and lack of mastering facilities in the UK, he drove forward a process which involved shuttling back and forth between Britain, the US and Holland, but the whole process was completed, with the CD-Rom up for demonstration, in 10 weeks.

Throughout his life Brian was a man of integrity and principle, a leader and far-sighted mentor, an immensely genial companion, much loved by all who knew him. Many will remember his trademark sign-off when closing a conference: 'And now we must end and return to our loved ones or, failing that, our spouses.'

Recognition of his sterling work came with the award of an OBE, and conferment of an honorary Doctor of Technology by De Montfort University.

It was natural that he should return to Exmouth on his retirement 10 years ago, first with the compassionate intent of helping his

ageing stepmother through the final years, and then to enjoy his fine, ever-expanding book collection, developing his many interests in art, history and crime thrillers, in no way impaired by his failing physical condition.

He left no surviving close relative.

Terry Cannon

former colleague, BL R&DD