

Names have been changed extracts from an AALL Conference diary 2001

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1. Getting there

Saturday 14th July 2001

On flight NW43 from Gatwick I am the excitable passenger in seat 22B glancing nervously at the permafrost several thousand feet below as we head rapidly over Greenland (?) for the USA. I am travelling (with much thanks to BIALL and AALL) towards the 94th AALL Meeting and Conference (my first) being held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I am due to speak in session H3 about the Social Science Information Gateway and the work led by IALS to develop the law section of the Internet Gateway (<http://www.sosig.ac.uk/law>).

At this stage the only thing I know for sure about Minneapolis is that Scott Fitzgerald (who would be my favourite author if I had to choose) was born and grew up just over the Mississippi river in St Paul. I confirm this from the back of my in-flight book. I am also clutching alternative reading matter, a bright red legal size set of notes on conference speaking from AALL, which is very informative if intimidating. I'm supposed to start strong and include a joke. I may be missing a joke - no longer sure if I'm speaking at a law library conference or auditioning for Saturday Night Live. I go back to reading a Pat Hobby story, Fitzgerald's tales about a Hollywood hack. My talk returns to mind.

My colleague, Dr Peter Clinch is in the next seat putting up with my fidgeting and giving me useful background information about our destination. Minnesota is known as the North Star State, was once Sioux territory and has at least 10,000 lakes (a figure later confirmed by every car registration plate). Minneapolis and St Paul are known locally as the Twin Cities and are at the heart of America's Midwest. Peter is due to speak in session H3 too, he will be talking about FLAG (the Foreign Law Guide), a RSLP-funded project he is managing and conducting to create a collection description web database of foreign law holdings in UK libraries (<http://ials.sas.ac.uk/flag.htm>).

My boss, Jules Winterton is also on the flight, representing the International Association of Law Libraries. At the gate we run into Sue Doe of Sidley Austin. Both Sue and Jules are AALL regulars and help fill us in on how to get the best from the conference (and complete the immigration form). We have arrived at the Twin Cities. We retrieve our luggage from one of the twin baggage belts and journey via freeway to the Hotel Regal on Nicollet Mall (featured famously in the opening credits of the Mary Tyler Moore show according to the conference programme). Peter and I share a taxi with more than sufficient room for 8 people. Nearing the city our driver mentions that there is no Hotel Regal – despite a faxed reservation confirmation to the contrary. He takes us to the Millennium to be found at the same address where I just make out the ghost of an old REG behind the bright new Millennium logo – a sign of how quickly everything moves here.

Just around the block in downtown Minneapolis is the impressive red Minnesota granite Conference Centre. All the hotels, Conference Centre and shopping malls are linked by enclosed overhead walkways called skywalks, so it is possible never to step outside at all. We do – and for the first time realise just how hot it is here. The skywalks and snow plough route signs remind us that Minneapolis has grown up as a Winter city, designed to cope with prolonged snowfall and deep wind chill - all of which is hard to imagine in this July heat. After checking in at the hotel, we call in at the Conference Centre for registration and collect packs including a considerable amount of new literature and our badges (fitted with distinctive yellow speaker ribbons).

We shake off some jetlag and in search of somewhere to eat find by accident “the Brit” a near-by theme pub decked out with traditional English pub décor and grub (from a transatlantic perspective). A glass cabinet at the entrance pays suitable homage to HP sauce and PG tips. We try to pick something American from the menu. My body clock is not easily fooled so before long I’m falling asleep over the conference handouts (sensibly divided into separate volumes for each day). Tomorrow is the 186 page first day.

2. Being there

Sunday 15th July 2001

Sunday is day one of Conference proceedings proper. We arrive fresh from breakfast in time to catch the opening speeches and ribbon cutting outside the Exhibition Hall by AALL President Robert Oakley and then join another 2500+ delegates or “attendeys” as we’re known here, trying hard to win a laptop in the free daily raffle. Strangely we miss out on the laptop but Peter triumphs at the West stand and secures some of the last available tickets to the legendary West party scheduled for the next night.

Sunday is a full day of presentations of amazing range and titles. With 6 or 7 concurrent sessions running, the substantial programme definitely has something for everyone. Session A1 appropriately starts the day with a practical, fast-paced talk by Gary Price, George Washington University, looking at the latest power search strategies for successful Internet searching. Like many of the best sessions during the week we are offered confirmation of shared concerns and insight into fresh ideas and new approaches.

In no time at all we’re due lunch. We head up to the presidential suite in the penthouse of the Hilton hotel for a special foreign delegates luncheon. We are guests of the AALL Executive Board in distinguished company including: Robert Oakley, Barbara Bintliff, Karl Gruben and Janis Johnston. Barbara Tearle leads the BIALL party of: John Furlong, Jules, Sue, Peter and myself. We enjoy wonderful hospitality and an incredible view of the Twin Cities and beyond.

After lunch, I catch the end of a session on Metadata and then another entitled, “Wireless Network: Is it time to untether users?”, not surprisingly about wireless network access (all of which sounds like an attractive prospect to the person who knots and unknits the data cables at IALS). My afternoon continues with “Technology Crystal Ball”, a session given by staff from Lexis-Nexis speculating on how next generation technology, bandwidth explosion, WAP pocket PCs and holographic subsystems will effect information providers and professionals. Later sessions on “Hitching reference librarians to the web rocket” and “New roles for cataloguers – subject access to the web” confirm we still have a job to do and tell us

about the development and use of web-based reference services and work at the Library of Congress linking cataloguing and Internet services and tackling issues of granularity.

A professional highlight of the whole conference happens later on the Sunday afternoon when Peter Clinch, Caron Rollins and I sit in on a meeting of the FCIL-SIS (Foreign, Comparative and International Law Special Interest Section) Teaching Foreign and International Legal Research Interest Group Meeting. Caron is Associate Law Librarian at Priestly Law Library, University of Victoria, Canada (and was Visiting Fellow in Law Librarianship at IALS in 2000). Around the table are many other creative professionals whose famous names I know from websites and journal articles. It's a great pleasure meeting: Jean Davis, John Nann, Priscilla Leung, Tim Mulligan, Marilyn Raisch, Mirela Roznovschi, Dennis Sears and Victoria Szymczak to name just a few.

The day finishes with the Opening Reception sponsored at no spared expense by Lexis-Nexis. Once the doors open it is rapidly standing room only. We mingle with characters from the Wizard of Oz and Peanuts. (Snoppy is on the back bar) A very friendly couple from Kansas are surprised and protective of the Wizard of Oz theme but apparently Judy Garland hailed from Minnesota so we guess that's alright. Walking back to the hotel at street level its impossible not to admire the night skyline formed by a cluster of well-lit skyscrapers, a little bit of Manhattan magic with two distinctive buildings known as the "necklace" and "tiara". Over a coffee served by "Mr Coffee" the indispensable machine in my hotel room, I check out the text for my talk and wonder if a joke about sausage will translate. It's not that the common language really divides it's just that some of the names get changed (and things are just that bit higher up). Once you know that the ground floor is the first floor you're fine.

Monday 16th July 2001

First thing Monday morning, I find an air-conditioned corner of the Internet room in the Exhibition Hall to catch up on email and news from home. I'm still trying to get the hang of the dress code. I've lost the tie but some people seem to mistake my jacket for a sign that I might be a potential source of funding. Unfortunately not. Generally everyone is dressed casually - as the temperature requires.

The extensive exhibition offers everything you can imagine needing in a modern law library and some. Many delegates are to be found learning more in half an hour about Lexis-Nexis and Westlaw products than would seem humanly possible, as they give full attention to detailed demonstrations and race to complete their reward cards before the next session - collecting a cuddly moose in an attractive Lexis T shirt and an overnight West designer bag (complete with wheels) to get him home in.

The moose and I attend a fascinating session on "Library Organisational Models" based on the experience of Boston College Law Library in developing a circular rather than hierarchical staff structure. The speakers explain how they co-ordinate IT and library services, develop joint responsibility for reference services, and improve perception of library services. Usefully every AALL session is recorded. By midday there is a steady trade at the tape stall.

I run into Sue and Peter for the Association Lunch. Every place at every table has a small North American blue spruce for attendees to take and plant at home. (Don't tell HM customs). Over lunch a series of awards and prizes are presented to members of the Association past and present and their supporters (AALL's answer to the Emmys). Make a note to myself always to sit facing the stage. Hein-On-line rightly

wins the product of the year award. The Awards seem a very good idea, an enjoyable way of encouraging and recognising participation from members.

Peter and I walk off lunch with a tourist interlude. Our walk takes us uptown to the Mississippi river, St Anthony Falls, and Stone Arch Bridge. Lots of photo opportunities. We miss "Show me the money!" Practical Tips for Negotiating a Salary Increase" apparently a popular session in the afternoon. (I have the tape).

Back at the Conference Centre we meet up with Jules and Marcie Hoffman, FCIL Librarian at Georgetown University, Boston who will be chairing session H3. Marcie treats us to a very welcome ice-cold coke and then quite rightly makes it clear that she is going to adhere strictly to the allocated time slots (and has ways of dealing with speakers who mess with the schedule). Peter and I negotiate 22 and 21 minutes respectively and practice speaking more quickly. Marcie kindly ensures that all the technology will be setup and waiting for us, which is a great relief (especially to the IALS Computing services Librarian).

We dash to the FCIL-SIS reception back at the Hilton. Sania Battalova, the first recipient of the Ellen Schaffer Foreign Librarian's Grant, enabling her to attend AALL from the Kyrgyz Republic, gives an inspired speech in perfect English and expresses an enthusiasm for the Conference that we can all share. Sania is Specialist for Information and Computer Technologies at the National Library Center for Legal Information in Bishkek. Later, several skywalks away in the Minneapolis Orchestra Hall, writer and broadcaster Garrison Keillor entertains courtesy of West Publishing to a capacity audience – giving us new insights into life in the North Star State and the library profession. At the party that follows we share a table with Mitch Counts and his wife and have a highly enjoyable evening catching up on Coronation Street, Eastenders, Friends and Frasier amongst other professional and political matters. The Street is shown in the US but is a good 3 years behind UK episodes. One of the many strengths of the conference is that the social side of AALL is very much a family event.

Tuesday 17th July 2001

The day has come. I want to check out the room and fortunately find a very interesting session ahead of us on "Designing IT job descriptions to attract the very best". In no time at all we're on - grateful for a civilised 10:45 time slot. Marcie introduces us to fellow speaker Rubens Medina, Law Librarian of Congress who starts proceedings with a talk on GLIN, the Global Legal Information Network. This is followed by 21 minutes of SOSIG and 22 minutes about FLAG precisely. We have terrific support from the British and Irish contingent and AALL's FCIL (and no tricky questions). Our projects are well received and there is much encouraging interest in UK-based initiatives. Jules takes us to lunch and discussion continues with Jean Davis, Sania Battalova and friends from the FCIL section.

After a brief pause to hit the local Barnes and Noble for some retail therapy, it's soon time for an organised excursion care of Jacqui and Heidi our driver and guide for an adventure in Stillwater and evening cruise on the St Croix river. Our coach is a little late leaving the Conference Centre and missing some delegates but hits the rush hour with determination. Jacqui has never driven north of the city before (she says) so Heidi starts her guiding early. To add to the excitement the coach transmission is playing up. On the freeway (one of several we try) the strange music from our driver's gears reaches an unusual pitch and frequency as if the coach is rapidly turning into an automatic whether it likes it or not. Unperturbed it manages a three point turn on

the narrowest, steepest side street in Stillwater overlooking (by a sheer drop) the St Croix River and the boat we should be on. Thanks to Jacqui running a few red lights and Heidi's mobile (or cellular) they hold the river boat and we make our sailing.

We have a terrific evening with Caron and Alan Rollins, tackle the floating buffet, and try out Caron's impressive digital camera. (Thanks to Caron for the photos). The river is the State line. With Minnesota on the left and Wisconsin on the right, and relaxing with half a glass of local brew, I'm convinced that Hawkeye and Chingachook could easily have paddled round the next corner. We watch the sun go down and look forward to the coach ride home.

Wednesday 18th July 2001

The TV weather man tells me that we are experiencing exceptionally high temperatures after all. This week last year averaged at 70F. We have 97F with humidity to match. Having lost (and found) my key in my room (don't ask) I make up for lost time at the Conference Centre by seeing 3 sessions in an hour (a boon of the parallel session format perfected by AALL). I learn a little about web publishing for cyber writers and a lot of useful tips for web site design and management. There is a thought-provoking suggestion that bad web design might in the not too distant future precipitate litigation.

The Wednesday afternoon brings a personal highlight of the week with a trip to the house (no 599) where Scott Fitzgerald grew up on Summit Avenue, a Victorian residential boulevard in St Paul. Peter and I master the public transport system, find a bus going in the right direction and purchase return tickets. Some people do the trip in a private air-conditioned taxi, but it wouldn't have been the same. We also see the Cathedral of St Paul (with Linus and Charlie Brown collecting for the roof), the State Capitol and the mansion of railroad tycoon James J. Hill.

We take the scenic route back round one of the 10,000 lakes, Como Park zoo and the State Fair ground. In the suburbs there is a celebratory flag flying on every porch. We see something of real life in this part of the world as the local schools and factories finish for the day, followed by pure fantasy with a complete full-scale stage coach in the lobby of the Wells, Fargo Bank.

Evening and everyone is in more formal dress for the closing reception, banquet and dance at the Hilton. There is much talk about the morning session on management called "Two to Tango: the following part of leading in library partnerships" illustrated by Paul and Donna, two ballroom dance professionals from Time to Dance. Another session showing "60 technology gadgets in 60 minutes (read all about them at <http://www.llrx.com/extras/gadgets.htm>) also still has people talking. Both sessions demonstrate something of the pace and imagination that characterise AALL.

We enjoy the closing banquet as guests at the table of BIALL's great friends Warren and Carol Billings. We have very good company, the best view of the stage and inside information on Board politics. At the top table the AALL Executive Board is introduced one by one by a member who reminds me of Bette Midler (but a touch less shy and retiring). After speeches and thank yous and food there is a presidential handover from Robert Oakley to Barbara Bintliff involving the gavel and a red feather boa (someone must have the pictures). At each table is a flock of shocking pink flamingo keyrings. The 2002 conference will be in Orlando, Florida and the pink flamingo is set to be the mascot. "Birds of a feather flock together" soon becomes the motto. Later at "the Local" (the nearest Irish theme pub) Mary Greenfield (Australian convenor), Sue Doe, John Furlong and John Eaton (President of CALL) share details

of their research into Minnesota State licensing law. We all reflect on the amazing organisation, size and scale of the American conference.

3. The Journey home

Thursday 19th July 2001 + Friday 20th July 2001

As if to mark the end of the conference the weather breaks on the Thursday morning - dramatically with a prolonged thunderstorm.

Packing to leave is a challenge. Apart from all the essential literature and business cards, I have to make room for my Lexis-Nexis moose and two pink flamingos. As the Gatwick baggage handlers must know only too well, its impossible to come back from AALL with less than you took (in all senses).

Sue, Peter and I do a quick tour of the Minneapolis sculpture garden, are impressed by a giant cherry and spoon and take shelter in the near-by Walker Art Center. One gallery is devoted to an exhibition of Manga comic art and traditional two-dimensional Japanese art. "Interesting" as they say. I am fascinated by the work of Alice Neel in another gallery. The Walker is definitely a modern art gallery. The general effect is enhanced by the sight of passing off duty eminent law librarians in day glow shorts. We sit out the storm in the top floor restaurant.

Before long it's time for the airport taxi and then flight NW44 homeward bound. There is a home-movie feel to the in-flight entertainment. As we travel just ahead of the night, a screen is pulled from the ceiling at the front of the cabin and everyone with a window seat is invited to lower their blinds so we can see the picture.

Thinking back on an amazing 6 days, I am reminded of an incident on my first day at the Conference when I was called upon to explain "AALL". I'd been standing in the Conference Centre foyer, studying a notice board, when a figure rushing from the exhibition hall stopped to inform me that he had been constructing all the display stands and demanded to know what this was about, asking suspiciously if it was all for lawyers. "Librarians" I said quickly. "Librarians" he repeated and as if that changed everything, shook me vigorously by the hand and then departed wishing me a very good stay (or day).

This had been an early indication of how librarians are held in some esteem here – which feels right. I can certainly say that it was a pleasure to share some of the infectious confidence, professional standing and energy demonstrated by legal information professionals in the US. They are remarkable people. Some of us were still bursting into spontaneous applause for weeks afterwards. It all comes highly recommended. Get your applications in now. You have to go and see.

With special thanks to BIALL, AALL and everyone who made my very good stay possible.