Papa Abel Remembers -- The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 14: Building and Computers in the Twentieth Century

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Earlier an account of the Copenhagen presentation to Scandinavian librarians was related. The same presentation was offered in London several weeks later to a group of about 50 UK university and research library librarians organized by Tom Slatner, then running the London office. Tom had enlisted Maurice Line, then director of the British Library subsidiary responsible for collecting all the scholarly journals and books and producing them in support of the Library’s international interlibrary loan service, to chair the meeting. (The London office was supplying all the non-UK, English-language books to Maurice’s library.) But there was a surprising delay in waiting — Maurice had invited Julian Blackwell to the presentation. I had no option but to lay out in considerable detail the firm’s systems, having learned of Julian’s presence only upon arriving at the room — that after all, was the point of the gathering. That a major competitor, who was having difficulty bringing up the systems to support a comparable offering, would have a detailed account of the firm’s systems and their capabilities was entirely beside the point — so, off I went on another six-hour presentation.

The session broke for lunch a little before noon. Maurice had, unknown to me, arranged that he, Julian, and I, were to go off to a different restaurant for lunch. I didn’t know, and don’t know today, if some sort of confrontation was expected or some other purpose was to be served. Whatever, in the course of lunch, I decided to make a proposal of a very different nature. I suggested to Julian that I would welcome the opportunity to sit down with him and his brother Richard to discuss the possibility of somehow merging our firms. I pointed out that each outfit had a great deal to offer the world of knowledge creation and distribution. But that in a genuine sense we were both wasting managment time and resources in our worldwide competition. I advanced the notion that some sort of an equitable method could not but prove a more powerful vehicle for carrying forward this cultural responsibility. I knew that the Blackwells were as committed to the cultural role of the distribution of knowledge and the stimulus thereof to new knowledge creation (ala Karl Popper) as were our band of Argonauts. He indicated that he would carry this message back. But I heard nothing further for some years when I learned that he had not sent his memo to Richard or the Blackwell board. Too bad! What might have emerged from such a joining of forces can still not be divined.

In the several weeks between these two presentations I had had much time in quiet evenings in hotel rooms to further reflect upon the meaning of these sessions and intervening mini-repeat to other librarians and publishers in Europe. I was particularly struck by the degree and extent into which I had fallen into the information trap. I, together with the entire band of Argonauts, had entered the game as bibliophiles and scientiaphiles (the latter a neologism invented for the immediate purposes herein) but were submerged in specific bits of information. It was true that we still dealt with books, the “violls” (to use Milton’s apt phrase) of knowledge, but their essence had been submerged within the continuing focus on programs and systems dealing with their control as objects rather than violls of hard-won knowledge. The only knowledge to be found in this welter data and technical information was the over-arching design of the system and its components — and more importantly the understanding of what the entire construct was meant to do. I, for example, no longer studied publishers’ catalogs or subject bibliographies, and together with the office managers I no longer selected books to fulfill a variety of users’ needs. Almost all the Argonauts were now setting up networks to couple the firm’s systems to library needs. I hardly knew what was being published, so I might add to the library that I had long planned to occupy my advanced years. A massive unforeseen consequence indeed.

Whatever, I returned to Portland to take up the tasks of getting a new building up and planning its layout. To this end, meetings with the managers of each of the individual operating sections were conducted to solicit their sense of the amounts of space and other facilities each would require to not only carry on their functions effectively but to provide for future growth. When these individual plans were in hand, collective meetings of all the managers were mounted to plan the co-ordination, and resulting physical relations were held to optimize the flow of books, cataloging, processing, and related functions. It took about six months to gather and integrate this information. Thereupon a rough layout, reflecting dimensions as well as operating relationships, was created. This layout was then taken to an architect from whom final construction drawings were duly received.

In the meantime, Keith Barker had been looking for a site of sufficient acreage to accommodate this building somewhat larger than two football fields placed side-by-side, plus another future building of the same size to accommodate growth, landscaped parking segments, and well-landscaped grounds. The
Biz of Acq — Collecting in the Cloud

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Out With the Network (Drive),
In With the Net

Using technologies to streamline services is old news at most libraries. Tools such as online video tutorials, elaborate subject pages, and online forms have been quickly adopted at the reference and circulation desks to both guide our users and solicit their input about our services. At the same time, our collections are an ever richer mix of online journal packages, eBooks of various stripes, databases, and streaming media. And yet, some of our library selection tools and procedures missed the tech wave.

When we took on collections coordination duties, we inherited a system that had seen the University libraries through major changes, from a predominantly print-based to a largely digital collection, not to mention wild budget vacillations. Our predecessors were extremely thorough and detailed, housing all manner of title lists, budget scenarios, and e-collections statistics on a shared network drive, that, like many such systems, had morphed into an untidy labyrinth of files and folders.

Moreover, collections decisions that required group input largely took place on email. Email is, without a doubt, one of the great communication devices of our time, but does anyone enjoy seeing her/his inbox light up with colleague number 14’s indication that they too agree with the purchasing decision at hand? There had to be a better way!

Cloud Computing, as defined by Wikipedia, is “location independent computing, whereby shared servers provide resources, software, and data to computers and other devices on demand, as with the electricity grid. Or more simply, remote computing.” Services like Google apps can help prevent the chaos of a shared network drive overflowing with multiple versions of the same documents, while also making your collection’s docs easier to search and organize. Similarly, tools like SurveyMonkey and Jing can round out your processes through simplifying your communication with colleagues about your shared collections decisions. Following are a few of the tools we’ve found most useful:

Google Docs and Sites

Have you ever tried unsuccessfully to locate a particular document on a shared drive, stumbling through Byzantine corridors of folders, eventually resorting to the dreaded Windows search function? Have you ever opened up an important document only to be prevented from making changes because someone else has it open, or worse, find that someone else has already made changes? What if you could...