

TOM FRENCH (1943-2008): A TRIBUTE



Tom was born and grew up in Worcester. He was a King's Scholar at the King's School there, won a state scholarship and an open exhibition to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he read Modern and Medieval Languages and developed his lifelong passion for linguistics. He then spent a year with the Herefordshire County Libraries, where, to his delight, his duties included driving the mobile library. In 1966 he went to the Postgraduate School of Librarianship at Sheffield University where he met fellow student Sonia. They married in 1969.

Tom was appointed to the University of Birmingham Library in 1967. Initially he was in charge of Reading Rooms – first Science, then Language and Literature – but in 1969 he was seconded to the automation team BLCMP (Birmingham Libraries Computer Mechanisation Project) working to develop computer applications to library processes. Automated cataloguing in the University Library began in 1972 and his colleagues still remember how, in training them, Tom's light-hearted technique was a lifeline in tackling the new mysteries of machine-readable cataloguing. In 1977 BLCMP became independent and Tom returned to the Library as Humanities Librarian, later adding Social Sciences. In 1990 he became Liaison Librarian in Humanities and amongst his other duties continued the development of the collections in West African, Canadian, Latin American, Japanese and German studies.

In 1996 Tom moved to the British Library as Head of Twentieth Century British (now Modern British) Collections. Major achievements of his tenure were close liaison with the Copyright Agent and the Standing Committee of Legal Deposit Libraries and the use of the Voluntary Deposit scheme to acquire microfilm. Colleagues in Northern Ireland remember with particular gratitude his support for the development of the Northern Ireland Publishing Resource, set up to collect local publications systematically. His own catholic view of collection development, which sometimes caused a flutter in the

cataloguing department, inspired the acquisition of a football fanzine collection, and in 2001 he initiated a study of local UK publications. Colleagues recall entertaining discussions on whether lost cat posters were part of the national published archive or not. Whilst in London he also served as an external examiner for the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies at UCL.

All through the Birmingham and BL years and on into retirement, Tom gave generously of his time and talents to Scolma and African Studies. He joined the Scolma Committee in 1980, was Subscriptions Manager from 1983 to 1996 when that post was subsumed in that of Treasurer and continued to manage Scolma's finances until 1999. He edited the fifth edition of *The Scolma Directory of Libraries and Special Collections on Africa in the UK and Europe* (1993) and was working with all his customary enthusiasm and willingness to embrace the latest technology on the sixth (online) edition right up until his last illness.

Scolma was however not alone. Tom, ever a "joiner" and a team player was also active in other Area Studies Groups and especially the British Association of Canadian Studies Library and Resources Group (BACS/LARG) of which he was a founding member and Publications Officer.

It is hard to envisage SCOLMA meetings without Tom. We will miss his efficiency, his expertise, his quiet humour (the long running joke about the French Collection of German literature was just one of many) and the very real sympathy and support he gave to all of us in time of professional or personal crisis. He was, quite simply, one of the nicest human beings you could ever meet, in or out of a Library. He died too soon. Africana Librarianship has lost another prop and we have all lost a friend. To Sonia, and their children, we extend our deepest sympathy.

Terry Barringer (with thanks to Sonia French for the photographs and details of Tom's early career)