

# Obituary

Trevor Fawcett

*compiled by Erica Foden-Lenahan and Gustavo Grandal Montero from contributions by Sonia French, Beth Houghton, Phillip Pacey and Clive Phillpot*

I received an email from Mary Fawcett in summer 2017 informing me that her husband Trevor, one of ARLIS's founding members, had died. Until I became editor of this journal, Trevor Fawcett was just a name seen in the membership directory as an honorary member. I had read his contributions to the *ALJ* and *News-sheet* during my MA librarianship studies and knew vaguely that he was one of the great and the good. But it was his kind offer to donate his copies of the journal to fill gaps in the ARLIS archive collection at the V&A archive that made me realize that he was still an engaged member of the community in spite of retiring 30 years ago, and his importance to ARLIS heritage is tremendous.

There are two obituaries published already in the Bath Chronicle<sup>1</sup> [LINK: <https://www.bathchronicle.co.uk/news/bath-news/historian-trevor-fawcett-who-championed-329431>] and the Guardian<sup>2</sup> [LINK: [www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/17/trevor-fawcett-obituary](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/17/trevor-fawcett-obituary)] They give all the essential dates and information about his life, as well as detail his scholarly work as an historian. So for this we have turned to fellow members of the ARLIS great and good – Sonia French, Beth Houghton, Phillip Pacey and Clive Phillpot – to elucidate Trevor's fundamental importance to the existence of ARLIS.

Sonia French spoke at Trevor's memorial service on the 15 September 2017 and below is her text, slightly modified.<sup>1</sup>

When in 1985 Trevor retired from art librarianship he was made an Honorary Member of ARLIS, the Society he had inspired; the following are some of the words written then by Clive Phillpot and there can be no finer introduction on Trevor and ARLIS than these words from Clive's dedication.

Trevor Fawcett has retired from art librarianship. An era is thus delineated. While Trevor had published on art library issues before the birth of ARLIS/UK in 1969, none of these articles had the impact of a short letter which appeared in the *Library Association Record* in March 1968<sup>2</sup>, asking if there was any interest in co-operation amongst art librarians.<sup>3</sup>

The response to that letter in 1968 was immediate and far-reaching; within a year ARLIS, the Art Libraries Society was established through a remarkable meeting of minds and spirit. Many of the art librarians who responded in 1968 have remained colleagues and friends throughout their careers. To quote from Beth Houghton, former Head of the Tate Library and Archive, and someone who has also played a key role in ARLIS's life:

In 1968, from his outpost at UEA in Norwich, and feeling that perhaps art librarianship had not so far been recognised as a distinct specialization within the UK, Trevor perceptively sensed a change coming and seized the moment with his letter to the *Library Association Record*. It was a rallying call to the community to come together for mutual support and the benefits of co-operation.<sup>4</sup>

Now ARLIS has, for nearly half a century, supported and sustained those working in the field of visual arts information. It has, quite simply been the defining force for generations of art librarians, not only in the UK, but

1. Sonia French, email message to author, 03 October 2017.

2. Trevor Fawcett's letter was reprinted in his 1994 article about the Society - "From the archives; or, how it all began" *Art Libraries Journal*, v.19 n.3 (1994): 5-7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307472200004041> Accessed 17 March 2018.

3. Clive Phillpot, "ARLIS/UK Confers Honorary Life Membership on Trevor Fawcett." *Art Libraries Journal* v10 no.1 (1985): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307472200004041> Accessed 17 March 2018.

4. Beth Houghton, email message to Sonia French prior to memorial service and to author, 4 September 2017.

internationally, as the UK Society was quickly copied in countries around the globe, from Europe to North America to Australia and New Zealand.

In 1979 one of early initiatives in international co-operation was a study tour to Germany, the first of many that took us far and wide across Europe and which became a very successful and enjoyable feature in the Society's programme. I have a photograph taken in a bar in Copenhagen in 1979 with Trevor and four other ARLIS colleagues including me gazing with mild disbelief at our table covered in glasses and bottles of Carlsberg. We were of course attending a conference.

Perhaps I can illustrate the extent to which ARLIS affected the careers of individual art librarians through my own working life. Initially librarians in academic, university, polytechnic and college libraries provided the core membership of the Society but gradually public reference libraries also swam into the ARLIS net. As someone working in a public reference library with a fine arts department, I was soon recruited into the Society's affairs. Over the years the range of the Society's work and activities increased, leading eventually to the employment of an Administrator, a post I was appointed to and was able to do from home. I'm not sure whether Trevor and the Society realized the extent to which this gradually became a French Family cottage industry with the children collating meeting papers across the kitchen table and floor and being dispatched to the local post office with bundles of ARLIS mailings and my husband rescuing me from the dire straits of address-label runs and the desk-top printing of the ARLIS Membership Directory. It was a privilege to work for the Society during a period of growth and optimism and was a highlight of my working life. Through ARLIS I have been able to keep in touch with colleagues from across the years; taking tea with the Fawcetts in Northampton St. during the Bath & Bristol conference is a pleasure I particularly recall.

As Beth Houghton has also said:

Later, although not quite so visibly involved, one felt that he was always there: a generous and gently guiding voice supporting those of us who have carried out the work of the Society over the years. His always thought-provoking writings and conference papers challenged us and reflected his questioning and scholarly approach to the subject area and the role of the visual arts in education and research along with the libraries that support it.<sup>5</sup>

5. Ibid.

Today is an occasion to emphasize the powerful influence of Trevor's vision, how art librarians and their collections together can stimulate the widest range of creative and intellectual energies. The first fifty years of ARLIS's life has seen education, collection growth and co-operation between art libraries. The burst of momentum and achievement of the earlier decades has been replaced by the challenges of fiscal rigour today but a shared collegiate understanding flourishes of what can be done in a time of contraction rather than expansion.

To quote again from Clive Phillpot on the occasion of Trevor's ARLIS honorary membership:

One might say that Trevor Fawcett was fortunate to raise the question of co-operation at a time when the soil for an art library organization was exceptionally fertile. But one can also propose that the incipient sub-profession of art librarianship was extremely fortunate in having Trevor Fawcett in the right place at the right time.<sup>6</sup>

6. Phillpot, "Honorary Life Membership".

Beth Houghton summarized her thoughts and I have amended them here where they are repeated in Sonia's recollections from the memorial service:

Although, in the last line of his *Library Association Record* letter, he recognized that 'art' should include 'applied arts as well as the fine arts *proper*', I suspect that Trevor, a true scholar-librarian in the Germanic tradition, found that he had created an organization of many and widely diverse parts, and that the dominant art library type (in the UK at least) was not the university art historical collection but the more professionally unorthodox art school sector

with somewhat different concerns. Although most of them became universities themselves in time, of course!

In perhaps characteristic style he seems to have stood back a little to let the organization get going, not serving as Chair until some 5 years later. And, in the early years, getting involved in those activities in which he had a particular interest – theoretical aspects of our practice to do with cataloguing and classification systems, and the early development of our international relationships. He also, of course, co-curated the successful *Art Press* exhibition of arts magazines at the V&A in 1976.

He is, without doubt, the father of ARLIS, and (as he once wrote we should aim to be) the ‘compleat art librarian’.<sup>7</sup>

Philip Pacey, a former editor of the *ALJ*, also referred to Trevor’s article ‘The Compleat Art Librarian’, originally published in the *ARLIS Newsletter* no. 22 March 1975 and suggested it be reprinted here, which it is. He said of all Trevor’s writings ‘...one stands out for me as being truly memorable and inspiring, a classic in its field, ... I referred to it often, ... It is truly worth more than all the stuff I wrote about art librarianship put together’,<sup>8</sup> *The Newsletter* was the forerunner to this journal and ceased its run exactly a year after Trevor contributed that piece.

On behalf of the *ALJ* editors and ARLIS/UK & Ireland itself, we would like to extend our condolences to Mary and to her and Trevor’s children. And we thank Sonia, Beth, Philip and Clive for their recollections, which have given us a glimpse of Trevor’s character as an art librarian, as well as reminding us of the Society’s historiography. Trevor Fawcett identified a gap in support for art librarians and founded an organization that, almost 50 years later, is still working for people in art libraries at every stage of their careers, which is quite a legacy.

7. Houghton, email message.

8. Philip Pacey, email message to the author, 06 August 2017.

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Erica Foden-Lenahan  
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**ARLIS**

Art Libraries Society

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Number 22 March, 1975

Newsletter

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The compleat art librarian, or what it takes Trevor Fawcett

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Discusses the qualities ideally needed by a subject specialist in the visual arts. The complexity of the literature, which is international, polyglot and multimediar, together with the dauntingly wide conceptual range and affiliations of the subject, demand a variety of skills and a high level of subject expertise and general knowledge. (TF)

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The business of a subject specialist, according to advocates of the system, should mainly be confined to book selection, classification, bibliographical and reference work, assistance to readers, and allied activities within his subject field. Responsibility for the acquisition (as distinct from selection) of books and other materials, their cataloguing or indexing, their storage and preservation, their loan and safe return, all this should fall to other professional or clerical staff with no particular subject knowledge or expertise, while general administration ought to be left to pure administrators. Given that such a model could apply only in a reasonably large library anyway, and skating over the serious political-professional implications of creating a scholarly élite that monopolizes the most interesting and creative aspects of library work, we might legitimately consider what the system asks of the subject specialist himself. How far can he live up to the expectations implicit in his title? In particular, to what extent is it possible to be a convincing subject specialist for the visual arts?

The most obvious problem he faces is the dauntingly wide scope of the subject field. Perhaps more than any other kind of subject specialist, the art librarian in a fully developed collection has to deal with a disparate assortment of materials and media, the result of his involvement with images and varied substitutes for original artefacts as well as with printed texts. So for him it isn't a simple question of fairly standard-format books and periodicals, plus an element of microform and non-book teaching material. He must also be concerned with collections of slides, photographs and other illustrations, prints and posters, films and videotapes, exhibition catalogues in quantity, sales catalogues, books and portfolios in every possible format, samples of design and artwork, and the book as art itself. This very diversity brings practical difficulties in its wake and already throws into doubt the proposition that the art librarian can dissociate himself from the functional side of library work. The acquisition of such materials is often complicated and requires a specialized knowledge of supply sources; their handling and storage and use may demand special techniques and equipment; the creation of the necessary bibliographic records will not be straightforward. At any stage the subject specialist may have to intervene, help, direct, and sometimes do the job himself. (The music librarian with his scores, discs and cassettes, or the geography librarian with his plans, maps and huge atlases, find themselves similarly involved in functional processes.)

But this is only one part of the problem. The visual arts shares with other subjects in the humanities a long perspective of literature. A significant proportion of past writing about art is still valid or partly valid, and in a sense none of it is really superseded since it continues to provide evidence of former attitudes and preoccupations, themselves the context in which art of the past was created. So the art librarian has to know about, and know how to obtain, non-current out-of-print literature; which means that he must be concerned actively with the antiquarian book trade and perhaps the auction houses as well. It also follows that he will need some of the skills and erudition of the rare book librarian.

At the same time the arts become increasingly international. Essential literature may be published not only in English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, but in Russian or Swedish or Dutch or Greek or many less accessible languages. Important exhibitions are staged in Auckland, Tel Aviv, Anchorage,

São Paulo or Tokyo. The insufficient - though now improving - bibliographical control of this international literature, and the short period some of it remains in print (some exhibition catalogues failing even to last out their exhibition), can complicate and frustrate acquisition. Nor are all the important books and catalogues necessarily issued by commercial publishers and established galleries. The ideal art librarian needs not only to be polyglot, he has to have a grapevine round the world - part of it underground. At the least he must keep an up-to-date watch on the art press and an international range of specialist bookseller's catalogues.

We are still far from done. Our subject specialist is becoming a bit of a paragon, but there are more demands to be made on him yet. The most challenging of all relates to the sheer compass of the visual arts: in their internal variety, in geographical extent, in historical time, and in their rich network of affiliations with other subjects. A few examples may make the point. Landscape gardening, photography, fabric design, vernacular architecture, gem carving, silhouettes, happenings, medals, tiles, comic strips... These all belong to the art ragbag and each has its technical, historical, social, economic, geographical, stylistic and biographical facets. Geographically too the whole inhabited world is the art specialist's oyster:

Let observation with extensive view,  
Survey the arts, from China to Peru.

The literature specialist by way of comparison takes on three or four countries, and not always that. And cruelly to press the point, most modern literatures hardly date back to the Gothic, which is pretty late in time by art historical standards. This long historical stretch from Palaeolithic drawings to the most recent Earth work is no joke to the art librarian trying to understand art in its proper historical dimension. To comprehend a decorated mediaeval psalter is to know quite a lot about the mediaeval church and its liturgy and iconography; and it is to be able to follow its Latin text, and to be aware of the development of illuminating styles in different regions and workshops. A Palladian building in a Repton landscape can be enjoyed, but not elucidated, without a certain background of Palladio himself, and Ancient Rome, and Claude, and the life-styles of the 18th-century English aristocracy. Art in context inevitably connects with other subjects and disciplines. Even the casual student of Courbet or El Lissitzky can hardly disregard their respective political situations. Learning to understand Michelangelo involves learning something about the Renaissance Papacy. Beginning with Constable or Kandinsky you are led to meteorology and theosophy. The art library, because the idea of art spills out in all directions, is continually straining to become a universal library with an art core. Whoever is responsible for it needs to be the most dedicated of specialists and the most outward-looking generalist.

Do I exaggerate? Very well, I exaggerate. But only to emphasize the extraordinarily wide framework in which the art librarian operates. And he must have these skills and that knowledge if he is to build a collection successfully, present it effectively, and exploit its contents with the right blend of scholarship, imagination, and reader psychology. To select a book is to reject all the other books - and the alternatives to books. It means trying to rise above current fashions and outside pressures by having the knowledge, and therefore the confidence, to do so. It means evaluating present needs and expectations against potential future ones. It requires an ability to 'place' a work in the imaginary museum and the imaginary library. It means a juggling act with price and scope and language and availability and a dozen other considerations. Should we buy this 19th-century volume on colour theory? Or that Dutch catalogue on art nouveau? Or yet another book on Duchamp? Or how about a filmstrip on the Czech baroque? (Give reasons for your choice.)

As a rule it's easy enough to give some superficial subject help to an enquirer; but to advise well and guide responsibly is a searching test of any librarian. Here he is in his direct role as educator. He has to pitch his response at the precisely appropriate individual level. He must stretch and stimulate, not mystify or overwhelm. Nor mislead by fault of omission or commission. In writing books the most effective popularizer is usually the expert with the common touch. So too in giving sympathetic help to a reader (enquirer? library user? customer? - is it symptomatic we have no better word?). Somehow we have to tune a vast potential of culture to an exact wavelength, so as to get library and librarian and reader to interact. It is surely a fallacy that librarianship techniques - however subtly applied - could ever in themselves compensate for a deficient subject and general knowledge? In science, to some extent, it may be like that. Science is more fundamentally concerned with factual data and empirical method; scientific activity is published to a fairly standard pattern and kept under a tight bibliographical rein. But not in the arts, an altogether wilder form of life. Impossible to teach an artist or an art historian, as you certainly might a scientist, in a few lessons, which are the handful of sources that will enable him to answer most of his future questions for himself. You can show them Thieme-Becker of course.

All this makes for a pretty full bill, and no-one is likely to be talented, wise, and polymath enough to fill it. Yet even when diluted by the cold water of practicality it remains the ideal. That is what it takes. Whether it is the right ideal is quite another matter, not to be gone into here. But at least when we talk about art subject specialization - the real thing, not some ersatz substitute - let's be clear in our minds what we mean. The complete art librarian.

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