
Bob McKee

Few leaders in the library and information (LIS) world will be missed more than Bob McKee. He died a few days before his 60th birthday, and two months before he was due to retire as Chief Executive of CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

In a 35-year career, mostly in the LIS sector, he was a major contributor to thinking on the role and social purpose of libraries. Bob will be remembered as a sharp-thinking, good-humoured, charismatic leader – a powerful and tireless advocate of learning, freedom of expression, and access to ideas and information.

Although his retirement was imminent, Bob told his friends there was much more to come. The initial focus was to be a new voluntary role for IFLA, in a team supporting free access to information and freedom of expression by strengthening national library associations. Bob was to champion libraries in Ukraine.

Bob was born on 16 August 1950 in Wallasey. His family then settled in Bury, which he always called home. He graduated from St Catherine's College, Oxford, in 1971. Then, swapping 'dreaming spires for dual carriageways', he moved to Birmingham University's Shakespeare Institute to write a Master's thesis on Elizabethan drama. After a brief spell back in Bury as a secondary school English teacher, he returned to Birmingham to research William Shenstone – whom he described as 'the undiscovered fulcrum of 18th-century literature' – for a Doctorate, awarded in 1976. In 1977 he gained his Postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship (with distinction) at Birmingham Polytechnic. The Midlands remained his domestic and professional base. He commuted to London when he became Chief Executive of the Library Association (LA), as highlighted in his 'Week in the Life' column in issue 37 of *SCONUL Focus*¹.

CAREER BEGINNINGS

Bob started as a trainee in Birmingham. Within three years, in 1978, he was promoted to Resources Librarian at Small Heath School and Community Centre. This early experience was formative: he found it exhilarating and reward-

ing, and counted the development of community library services among his key achievements. He became a champion of libraries, an inspiration for students and working professionals alike, and a mentor for many more.

His appetite for learning led him to become Tutor Librarian in Solihull College of Technology (1979-83). He next became Senior, then Principal, Lecturer in the School of Library and Information Studies at Birmingham Polytechnic. He shone in this role: always something of a showman, he entertained with wit, wisdom and empathy. Former students have many fond memories of his lectures, and the support he gave them.

Now began Bob's active engagement in the LA – in the West Midland Branch and the Association of Assistant Librarians (AAL), including editing their newsletters. His first issue of *Assistant Librarian* contained a bibliography on beer. His AAL Presidential address in 1985 looked at current issues: the future of professional development, the threat to public libraries, the need for leaders to develop and promote a philosophy for their service. It is powerful and relevant reading today.

Bob wrote extensively, his output including three monographs: *The Information Age* (Forbes, 1985); *Public Libraries into the 1990s* (AAL, 1987); and *Planning Library Service* (Bingley, 1989). As a speaker he never quite lost the pedagogic influences of his library school period, but his content was always well structured, and his delivery assured, amusing and entertaining. At this year's Welsh CILIP conference, for instance, he received a standing ovation. As a conference Chair, he could sum up a speaker's contribution of 40 minutes in (probably three) concise points, and provide the perspective his audience needed, making links with the thoughts of previous speakers to draw conclusions that had escaped everyone else. He made it look so easy.

In 1988 Bob was appointed Chief Librarian and Arts Officer at Solihull. Following a restructure he retained his portfolio but became a director of the authority, heading Libraries and Arts in 1990, before becoming Assistant Chief Executive.

NATIONAL STAGE

His sharp mind, strong presentational skills, approachable nature and political nous meant that he was soon playing a major part on the national stage. Government appointments included: Chair of the Working Group on Public Library Objec-

tives (1989-91), which helped develop Annual Library Plans; and member of the Library and Information Services Council (1991-95), then LIC (the Library & Information Commission, 1995-2000).

Bob's role as Assistant Chief Executive in Solihull included responsibility for economic development (including inward investment, land use, regeneration and external funding) and co-ordination of key policy areas. So when he applied for the post of LA Chief Executive in 1999 he had perhaps the ideal mix of experience – higher education, community librarianship, local government at senior level, and a term on the board of the Birmingham Libraries Computer Management Project (BLCMP).

Change was already on the LA agenda but it was down to Bob to make it happen. This was grist to the mill for him: he was always the man for the big picture. Bringing together the LA and the Institute of Information Scientists (IIS) to create CILIP was a challenge he relished. Bob was a highly skilled servant of Council. His often self-deprecatory humour was deployed to defuse tense situations. Problem areas were always analysed into his 'three things'. While this provided constant amusement to trustees, who admired his predictability, it was a structured way of getting colleagues to think about solutions rather than problems.

As CILIP's first Chief Executive, he presided over three major initiatives to reduce costs. However, the world financial crisis of 2008-09 meant that further action was needed. He was working on further cuts just before he died. Despite this extraordinarily difficult environment, he remained cheerful both at work and outside. He was never bowed down by the burden of the decisions he was having to take. At the same time, he was acutely aware of the effect of those decisions on individual staff, and managed the process of downsizing as humanely as possible. Bob's role transcended that of manager of an institution. He was an inspirational leader and pioneer of the profession, with consummate skills in advocacy. That is how he developed the role of the Chief Executive. He could not have done it any other way.

His work increasingly engaged with government. He was an enthusiastic, articulate member of the working group and implementation group for *Framework for the Future*. This vision for public libraries was the first since the 1964 Public Librar-

ies and Museums Act. It was the clearest definition of their role, purpose and priorities seen for many years, and was a testament to Bob's vision and clarity of thought. He was tireless in promoting the strategy nationwide.

That clarity and vision were employed to good effect in the most recent public library modernisation review. His contribution to *Empower, Inform, Enrich* includes a cogent definition of their core purpose, but also argues compellingly for their contribution to wider strategic priorities. Bob was one of only two external consultants for the review of public libraries in Northern Ireland. His wealth of expertise and clear analysis were major factors in its success.

Another example of his contribution to innovation and service development was his work in Worcestershire. The university and local authority have collaborated in major city centre regeneration, creating a Library and History Centre, the only such initiative in the UK (see article in this issue of *Focus*). Bob was instrumental in bringing their vision to life, and was appointed Visiting Professor in the Department of Information and Learning Services in 2006. His acceptance address, 'Finding the Words: the meaning and value of libraries in modern society', reads like a summary of everything Bob believed in: values and ethics, research, and that 'the utility of libraries – their instrumental value – is expressed within a strikingly consistent framework of broad public policy areas interlinking the educational, social, cultural, economic and democratic agendas'. To illustrate, he used poetry (including Shenstone, of course, and Ted Hughes) to draw surprisingly appropriate analogies between the public house and the public library.

Bob was on the Advisory Council for Libraries (ACL) and the Public Lending Right Advisory Committee. He was a board member of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) from 2003. In all these roles he was a powerful advocate for libraries in all sectors.

INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

Increasingly Bob engaged with the international dimension of his role. No sooner had he taken the helm at the LA than he became Co-Chair of the National Organising Committee for IFLA Glasgow in 2002. He was on the Governing Board and Executive Committee of IFLA. He was actively involved in IFLA-FAIFE, a core activity of IFLA

working on free access to information and freedom of expression.

'Why IFLA?' Bob asked in his blog written from the IFLA conference in Gothenburg, days before he died. 'Because of the people you meet', he explained in his daily reports, his persistent optimism shining through. Networking was his metier: he enjoyed interacting with people and took a genuine interest in them. He was not only looking forward to his new role, as he put it, 'as one of a team of so-called "experts"' – he was 'excited' by it. His excitement was not only about building the capacity of national library associations. His aspiration extended to 'leveraging the philanthropy of the Gates Foundation to advocate to government and the media about the value of libraries in society'. Few people could do that as well as Bob. Good humour was an intrinsic part of Bob's make-up. Some of his presentations could have attracted ticket sales: those at IFLA in Quebec and Milan, in French and Italian respectively, are legendary. He was a pleasure to wine and dine with, for his wit and banter, his insight, mastery of his subject and sheer conviviality. Bob was fearless in his advocacy, but when he locked horns with someone it was always very good-natured.

His sense of humour would have been tickled by the knowledge that he was to die shortly after drinking in a bar called Heaven. At the same time he would have seen the irony in leaving this world surrounded and excited by people who were to have been part of his new future.

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NOTES

- 1 Bob McKee. 'A week in the life of CILIP's Chief Executive', *SCONUL Focus*, 37, Spring 2006, p.16-18