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## Diana Mary Priestly: An Appreciation\*

Ann Rae\*\* and Balfour Halévy\*\*\*

“It’s the end of an era.” That was the sentiment expressed by so many when Diana Priestly died in Victoria, British Columbia, on March 27, 1997. As the two of us reviewed Priestly’s life and remarkable achievements for this appreciation—remembering things we had both forgotten<sup>1</sup>—we were struck by the rightness of this observation. In a real sense, Priestly’s passing brought to a close an era in Canadian academic law librarianship.

Diana Priestly was born in Calgary, Alberta, on September 22, 1922; her mother was an English Red Cross nurse who met and married a Canadian captain and came out to live in Calgary after the First World War. Her father was a newspaperman, and the family, which included two boys, Michael and Frank, valued reading and education highly.

Law librarianship was not Priestly’s first choice of a career. After spending time as a Wren during the Second World War, Priestly enrolled at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and received her B.A. in 1947. “I went to law school after having been in the war because I thought I could perhaps play a role in the Department of External Affairs in diplomatic work. You must remember that was the time of the starting of the U.N. and the whole ideal of peace in the world, and I thought it would be quite exciting to play a role . . . but I didn’t get into External Affairs because they weren’t taking women in those days.”<sup>2</sup> After earning an LL.B. in 1950, Priestly articulated with a law firm on Vancouver Island and stayed on with the firm for a time after articles.



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1. Interview by Maryla Waters and Balfour Halévy with Diana Priestly, as part of the Aural History Programme, Provincial Archives of British Columbia (Sept. 30–Oct. 1, 1988) (unpublished transcript, on file with the Provincial Archives and the authors) [hereinafter Priestly Interview]. Our memories were aided by the transcript of this wonderful aural history.

2. *Id.* at 6.

With no opportunities at External Affairs in the offing and only lukewarm interest in a career practicing law, Priestly became interested in Marian Gallagher's program in law librarianship: "I remembered that my mother had always thought I should be a librarian . . . and got myself organized to go down to the University of Washington in the September class of 1952."<sup>3</sup> While she could have worked in the United States upon graduating in 1953 with her Master of Law Librarianship, she took Marian's advice and returned to Canada to work for Dean Curtis in the Law School Library at the University of British Columbia. Marian had said, "You won't make as much money, but Canada has no trained law librarians anywhere at the moment. . . . You should go back and get the whole move toward the professionalism of the law libraries in Canada . . . started."<sup>4</sup> And get it started she certainly did.

### A Legacy of Libraries

With a couple of interesting diversions, Priestly's career traces the growth and expansion of academic law libraries in Canada. At British Columbia, she ran a one-person library for ten years. She had a very small book budget (one professor referred to her as having champagne tastes on a beer budget) and selected materials that were then ordered and paid for by the main library. All other work, such as kardex and processing, was done by Priestly with the assistance of law students who were paid a small honorarium by the dean to work at the circulation desk. Priestly's formidable knowledge of legal bibliography began at UBC. Encouraged by her former law professors, she learned as much as she could from each book in the collection. "We really could milk the very small collection we had to get the most out of it . . . I learned then, if Marian hadn't already made it clear to me, the importance of reading prefaces, and I always tried to pass that on to students. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Priestly "is credited with teaching legal research skills to a whole generation of lawyers in British Columbia."<sup>6</sup>

In 1963, when Priestly was approached by Cecil A. Wright, dean of the law school at the University of Toronto, she was ready for a change. Discouraged by her inability to increase resources for the library at UBC, she jumped at the chance to go to Toronto where the library had some staff besides the law librarian and a book budget that more than doubled UBC's. Her appointment as law librarian and assistant professor made her the first Canadian-born woman with professorial rank on a Canadian law faculty. At Toronto, she was instrumental in setting up the Rowell Room collection in public interna-

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3. *Id.* at 18; see also Laura M. Goldsmith, *History of the University of Washington Law Librarianship Program*, 82 L. LIBR. J. 239, 253-54 (1990) (describing program during the early 1950s).

4. Priestly Interview, *supra* note 1, at 21.

5. *Id.* at 26.

6. John N. Davis, *Diana Mary Priestly*, 55 THE ADVOCATE 765 (1997).

tional law using funds donated by the Rowell-Jackman families. In addition, because of the graduate programme at the University of Toronto and course offerings in foreign and comparative law, she was able to expand her own knowledge and the collection in these areas. By her own admission she was bored, however, and frustrated by a dean who was a great scholar and book man but uninterested in librarianship and the resources needed to run a modern law library.

At this juncture, Priestly considered going to the United States, specifically to Harvard. Law librarian Earl Borgeson, a fellow University of Washington alumnus, had a training programme where librarians from one-person libraries could gain firsthand experience by working in all of the library's departments. In fact, the immigration papers were on her desk when Balfour Halévy suggested a different choice. Balfour had taken on the job of establishing the York University Law Library when the profession's law school at Osgoode Hall moved north to become part of York. Marian Gallagher's advice was to make the move, and in 1967 Priestly became assistant law librarian and assistant professor at York University. She later would say that "this was a unique experience and probably the most interesting and exhilarating three years I have ever spent."<sup>7</sup>

With a capital grant of one million dollars, Balfour and Priestly had an extraordinary opportunity. "It wasn't going to be anything like law school libraries had been to that point. It was going to be a model of an American law school library. . . . Our young faculty members were all coming back from graduate work in the States and were full of what they had seen in the American libraries and demanding that they get this service in Canada, so it was a chance to do what . . . [one] had been trained to do."<sup>8</sup> She and Balfour divided the collection development responsibilities, Priestly taking Canada and the British Commonwealth, and Balfour taking American and foreign materials, periodicals, and texts. By all accounts, Priestly brought together a phenomenal collection of Commonwealth materials. Many of the items microfilmed later by Research Publications Inc. (now Primary Resource Media) for its nineteenth- and twentieth-century collections were available at York because Priestly bought them.

In talking about those exciting years at York, Priestly mentioned the wonderful relationships that were forged with publishers like Fred B. Rothman, who was then beginning to reprint many older titles that were in short supply or poor physical shape. Mr. Rothman offered first choice of his secondhand collection and worked with Balfour and Priestly to build the periodical section. Priestly had a great deal of respect for Ken Barnett, who represented the

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7. Priestly Interview, *supra* note. 1, at 43.

8. *Id.* at 44.

Carswell Company in those days. "I'd phone him and say, 'Ken, I want to work on Australian statutes when you come in next week.' He would get the lists that were available, the bibliographies, of Australian statutes, and when he came in he knew as much as I did—sometimes more—about what had been published and what was available, and we would work together [and] place our orders."<sup>9</sup> It was also through Ken that York bought Carswell's editorial set of Canadian statutes, an almost complete run that was a rarity to find and a coup to acquire.

In 1968, Priestly made a wonderfully successful buying trip to England, Scotland, and Ireland. "At the time it was thought to be a very old-fashioned method to use, but oh, the material we were able to get as a result of that visit."<sup>10</sup> The relationships she made on that trip with Mr. Sinkins of Wildy's Bookstore in London and other suppliers were called upon again in 1974, when Priestly returned to British Columbia to build a new law library at the University of Victoria.

Before Victoria, however, Priestly held two other positions, both departures from library work. From 1970 to 1972, she was director of research at the University of Western Ontario's Law School where she taught legal bibliography and research methods to students in both the law and library schools. In 1975, Priestly went to work for the federal Department of Justice in Ottawa as a legal officer. There she was involved in the development of a number of diverse projects including a program of civil law-common law exchanges for students, law for the layman, an index of current Canadian legal research, and a prelaw programme for native law students. Both positions proved ultimately disappointing, however, so when Murray Fraser approached her to join him if he became dean of a new law school at the University of Victoria (UVic), she readily agreed.

Priestly began her appointment as law librarian at UVic in June 1974. Her first responsibility was to write a grant application to the Law Foundation of British Columbia for \$640,000 to augment the funds the university could provide to build a law collection. Since the first students would not arrive until September of 1975, she had a year to put a basic collection in place, hire and train staff, establish services, and set up library facilities in a section of the main library. Books came from a wide variety of sources—the vendor contacts she had made overseas and in the United States and Canada, other Canadian law school and courthouse libraries which culled their shelves for duplicates, law firms in British Columbia, and the Legislative Library in Victoria. And, of course, Priestly built much more than a basic law collection.

Priestly's stamp was on every aspect of the UVic Law Library, including its new quarters in the law building, which was officially opened on November

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9. *Id.* at 51.

10. *Id.* at 51–52.

15, 1980. It was entirely fitting that, when she retired in 1987, the library was renamed the Diane M. Priestly Law Library. "I was very moved because after my mother died, they named a little island in a lake in Northern Saskatchewan after my mother as a bird sanctuary, so all I could think of was, 'Oh, like my mother.'"<sup>11</sup>

### Professional Leadership

To talk only about the positions Priestly held is to miss the substantial contribution she made to the law library profession in Canada. While she was not one of the founders of the Canadian Association of Law Libraries (CALL), she was one of its early members and hosted its first Canadian meeting at the University of Toronto in 1966. The conference fee was two dollars, fifty cents more than was actually needed for expenses. Priestly served as vice-president (1966–69) and then president (1969–71) while CALL was a chapter of AALL. Much of the work she did was bibliographic in nature since Canadian law libraries were lacking the basic tools that were taken for granted in the United States. She did some early work on the *Index to Canadian Legal Periodical Literature* and, with Balfour Halévy, produced the first edition of *Periodicals in Canadian Law Libraries: A Union List* in 1968. Priestly also began the project that resulted in Alice Janisch's 1972 report on the publication of Canadian administrative decisions,<sup>12</sup> a work that had an impact on the haphazard publishing practices of some administrative tribunals.

One of Priestly's greatest contributions to Canadian law librarianship was as editor of the *C.A.L.L. Newsletter*, begun in 1970. To characterize her simply as editor, however, does not capture her role: she was its driving force and chief contributor. As CALL's only regular vehicle of communication, the *Newsletter* helped to bridge distances between the handful of librarians who were strung across the country from British Columbia to Newfoundland. It was a gold mine of useful information: timely, short, accurate, and practical. And many of us read every issue from cover to cover. It is a measure of her effort that, when Priestly gave up the editorship in 1973, succeeding editors found the work too much for one person and began to share the workload.

Priestly's personal qualities were as well known as her professional accomplishments. Her wit delighted with a wickedness that was made sharper by her astute observations of people and events. She had a great capacity for friendship. At AALL meetings, Priestly made a point of getting together with friends like Bethany Ochal and Viola Bird. She had a way of being

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11. *Id.* at 136.

12. ALICE H. JANISCH, PUBLICATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE DECISIONS IN CANADA: A REPORT COMPILED FOR THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF LAW LIBRARIES (1972).

interested—genuinely but not intrusively—in a wide variety of people from all levels of the social spectrum. It is telling that on her retirement from the University of Victoria she rejected the idea of a dinner to which the Bench and Bar would be invited. “What I would like is a great big, old-fashioned tea party with proper tea cups and people pouring, like something out of the fifties.”<sup>13</sup> Her guest list included acquaintances from all over the campus: two truck drivers of whom she was fond (they had made so many deliveries in the early days of the library that they almost became part of the staff), as well as people she knew from committee work—chemists, fine arts professors, musicians, historians. Of course, everyone came and felt honoured to be asked.

Priestly was a pioneer, but, unlike many pioneers, she had the satisfaction of seeing her efforts recognized during her lifetime. First and foremost, she had the respect and admiration of colleagues. CALL created the Diana M. Priestly Scholarship in 1987, and in 1988 Carswell published a collection of essays in her honor.<sup>14</sup> While she was pleased to be named Emeritus Professor by the University of Victoria, she declined its offer of an honorary degree, saying that having the library named for her was honour enough. As Distinguished Alumnus for the University of Washington Library School for 1988, she was celebrated by the school that had launched her on a very happy career.

Although she acted as a teacher and mentor to many, Priestly did not suffer fools gladly. She was, however, generous and patient with anyone who genuinely wanted to learn. She had high standards both for herself and for those around her. It is no accident that, at the unveiling of her portrait at UVic, her staff referred affectionately to the picture as “Miss Standards Priestly.”<sup>15</sup> For those of us fortunate enough to work directly for or with her, her influence was pervasive and permanent. She was tough-minded and high-minded, sensible, honest, and extremely hard-working.

Priestly did not leave a body of writing about legal materials or law librarianship. Her legacy is the libraries she built and the changes in the profession that she brought about by careful, quiet, and persistent work. In an era when printed sources of legal information dominated, her mastery of the literature, particularly Canadian and Commonwealth materials, was second to none. She set a benchmark few—if any—have been able to meet.

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13. Priestly Interview, *supra* note 1, at 137.

14. LAW LIBRARIES IN CANADA: ESSAYS TO HONOR DIANA M. PRIESTLY (Joan N. Fraser ed., 1988).

15. Priestly Interview, *supra* note 1, at 136.