

Guido Biagi: a pioneer of international librarianship

Anna Maria Tammaro*

The debate if the library and information profession is an international profession is becoming more and more actual in a global world, where information and documentation are spread and diffused in every part of the world. However the idea of the international dimension of the profession started in 1876 when the modern library profession began to be organised by Library Associations in the United States and in 1877 in the United Kingdom. In this first phase of international librarianship, the international Conferences spread enthusiasm for a newly organised profession. The participation to these International Conferences was important for sharing knowledge and experiences and a tool for internationalising the profession. The program of the International Conferences was always of international interest, especially focused on the presentation of the most important library topics. In Europe International Conferences were held in London in 1877, together with the birth of UK Library Association and again in 1897 for celebrating the twentieth year of the British Library Association. Another International Conference was held in Paris in 1900 in coincidence with the Universal Exposition. International Conferences were also held in the United States: a World Congress of Librarians was organised in Chicago in 1893 and in San Francisco in 1904, with a pre-Conference in Saint Louis. In the same period "Library Journal", the oldest professional journal, started the publication (1897); the Cutter cataloguing rules were developed (1876) and the Dewey decimal classification was diffused (1876). Dewey also founded the first institution in the

United States for the instruction of librarians in 1884: the "Columbia School of Library Economy". These events brought American librarianship at the forefront of the field and attracted the notice of many interested colleagues around the world. In 1900 ALA started the Committee for International Relations, which produced the first Guidelines regulating relations among countries and institutions in 1947. It was not easy for European librarians to face the journey across the Atlantic Ocean; the delegation to American Conferences was however representative. Guido Biagi was one of the first Italian librarians who participated to international conferences. He took part in the second International Librarians Congress held in London in 1897, in the one held in Paris in 1900 and in the one held in St. Louis in 1904. He was chosen by the Government as Italian representative because of his knowledge of English and for his great competencies and knowledge (Petrucciani 2002).

Profile of a pioneer

Guido Biagi was born in Florence on January 29th 1855 and died in Florence on January 6th 1925. He began his career as librarian in 1880 at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, and during his life he was Director of some of the most important Italian libraries such as Biblioteca Marucelliana, Biblioteca Laurenziana and Biblioteca Riccardiana. Biagi studied philology at the university and was a student of the famous Bartoli, who taught the historical method. He got his doctorate in 1878 in Florence, at the Regio Istituto di Stato di Studi superiori e perfezionamento (Roxas 1976). Among his works we can remember *Indici delle voci di soggetto del Mare Magnum di Marucelli*, that was brought out during his direction of the Biblioteca Marucelliana and was published with an historical

* Università degli studi di Parma.
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essay of Biagi himself; and another work, *Giunte e correzioni alla Bibliografia Dantesca di Colomb de Batines*, published in the series Sansoni. Both works offer a completion and supplement for important bibliographic monuments of the past. He also founded the “Rivista delle biblioteche e degli archivi” that was his creature from 1888 until his death in 1925. The journal outlived him just by one year and in 1926 a government review was published, “Accademie e biblioteche d’Italia”, a sort of passing of the baton in order to confirm that Biagi and his activity of professional literature: in fact his journal and his works were published also in other non professional journals such as “Il Marzocco”, “Nuova Antologia” etc. It was of great importance for the debate and growth of the professional community. In the history of Italian librarianship, Biagi can be remembered for his precious ability to get new trends abroad and bring them back to Italy, at a level of a professional debate or a level of public press promotion or “advocacy” of library important role for education and learning. He always applied the most advanced technology to libraries and library equipment. During his direction (as Prefetto) of the Biblioteca Marucelliana he realized big changes for the institute like heating, re-organization of reading rooms and introduction of the first type writing machines (around 1905), a new device coming from America. After Italian re-unification, Biagi had also a politic role in the first reforms in library field as advisor and later as Deputy-minister under Minister Coppino and Minister Martini. He published his proposal of library organisation but didn’t reach the hoped results (Biagi 1906). Biagi cooperated with Sansoni, the well-known publisher, and, in order to internazionalize the profession, encouraged the translation of important foreign works for Sansoni. Biagi himself translated *On the Construction of Catalogues*



Guido Biagi in a picture from the Almanacco dei bibliotecari italiani, Roma, Fratelli Palombi

of Libraries and of a General Catalogue, and their Publication by means of Separate Stereotype Titles; with Rules and Examples (Jewett 1890). Then he promised to translate some of Cutter’s cataloguing rules but he never did it. Biagi was also co-founder in 1896 of the Italian Bibliographic Society that gathered both librarians and scholars in order to promote bibliographic studies. However, the Italian Bibliographic Society was not able to gather all the Italian librarians (Petrucciani 2002). Not before 1926 it was possible to have such an association, with the constitution of Italian Library Association and the political

support of the new General Direction of the Academies and Libraries.

What was the impact of Biagi in the Italian library scenario? De Laurentiis has particularly studied the work and activities of Biagi (De Laurentiis 2000, 2004, 2009). His cultural promotion role is highlighted by some authors (Roxas 1976; Cerasi 2000). In that role he organized several associations (the Leonardo da Vinci, with Orvieto Brothers) and conferences (Casa di Dante and Lectura Dantis), in a period full of ideas and cultural proposals in Florence (De Gregori and Buttò 1999; Fornaciari 1925; Sorani 1925).

The first vision of international librarianship

Biagi proposed his idea of international librarianship at the International Congress in St. Louis in 1904.¹ Sixteen countries were represented in the Congress: Austria, Belgium, Chile, France, Germany, Great Britain, Guatemala, Holland, Honduras, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Sweden and US. Among the participants to this International Congress there were famous American librarians as Dewey, Cutter, Jesse, together with William Axon from Manchester and Otlet and La Fontaine from Bruxelles.

Biagi was convinced of the international dimension of the library profession and stated for the first time the idea of international librarianship, which was based on library cooperation (Biagi 1904):

One of the special characteristics of the library of the future will be co-operation, and internationalism applied to the division of labor. (p. 11)

In his presentation *The library: its past and future*² Biagi expressed his idea that international cooperative libraries would need in the future document supply service, bibliographic standards, preservation and other technical areas.

Bibliographic standards

According to Biagi, the first goal of librarian cooperation is to promote knowledge of works and their connections, including the sharing of bibliographic standards of cataloguing (Biagi 1904):

In the library of the future, classified on the Decimal system, or Cutter's expansive, every section should contain a sheaf of cards on which should be collected, arranged, verified and even translated this ancient material, which may throw light on new studies and on new experiments; for the empirical methods of our forefathers, like tradition and legend, have a basis of truth which is not to be despised. (p. 15)

Biagi was actively promoting the card catalogue in Italy. An article of Biagi in "Rivista delle Biblioteche e degli Archivi" reports a letter from Richardson about cooperation (Biagi 1903). Richardson proposed three points for International printed cards: 1) uniform size (12,5x7,5); 2) uniform rules of cataloguing; 3) uniform subject headings. The card catalogue is seen as a tool for international cooperation (Biagi 1902, 1904).

We may already see premonitory symptoms of this in the "Catalogue of scientific literature" now being compiled by the Royal Society of London, in the Concilium Bibliographicum of Zürich, in the Institut de Bibliographie of Brussels, and in the card catalog printed and distributed by the Library of Congress at Washington. (p. 12)



The Biblioteca Marucelliana of Florence (in the picture, the reading room) was directed by Guido Biagi from 1886 to 1891

According to Biagi, scholars, above all, would appreciate the scientific importance of a card catalog, because armed with cards they passed days and nights “in pressing from the old books the juice of wisdom and of knowledge and in collecting and condensing it in their miscellanies”. The idea of quality of collection is combined with bibliographical cooperation. Biagi complained about the huge quantity of publications without quality that lessened the importance of libraries.

The appraisal of literature which has been already discussed in books and congresses will continue to increase in importance and in this work of discrimination we shall need the aid of critics to read for other man and to light up the path for those who shall come after. (p. 11)

Access to publications

The vision of the modern library is different from the one of “a deposit of memories or of embalmed residua of life” (Biagi 1904).

But internationalism and co-operation will save the future library from the danger of losing altogether its true character by becoming, as it were, a deposit of memories or of embalmed residua of life, among which the librarian must walk like a hearer of the dead. (p. 12)

Biagi affirmed that the role of library cooperation was especially to improve the access to publications through interlibrary loan:

This cooperation, however, will have to be more widely extended and must assert itself not only by exchanges of cards and of indices but also by means of the lending of books and manuscripts, of the reproductions of codices or of rare and precious works. (p. 12)

Technologies and the future of libraries cooperation

In his anticipations of the future of the library, Biagi dwelt upon the results to be obtained from co-operation and interchange, and he envisioned what he called “the true library of the nations” which now we call “digital library”. The future library is based on the photographic reproduction of famous books and of audio-books, in consideration of the technologies at that time already under way (Biagi 1904).

Thus should we form the true library of the nations, which, with the facsimiles, would bring together the critical editions of their authors and the translations and the texts made for the explanation of the works. (p. 12)

... And so the day will come when the libraries of Europe and of America and of all the states in the Postal Union will form, as it were, one single collection, and the old books, printed when America was but a myth, will enter new worlds bearing with them to far off students the benefit of their ancient wisdom. (p. 13)

... And then some patron who from being a multi-millionaire, as was his far-off ancestor, will have become at least a multi-billionaire, will provide here in America for the founding of libraries, not of manuscripts, which will no longer be for sale, but of re-production of codices in black or in colors; and we shall have libraries of facsimiles most useful for the study of the classics, just as we now have museums of casts for the study of the plastic arts.

Biagi foresaw some possible negative consequences, related to the changes in users behaviour and on copyright: just the same as libraries experience today with the access to resources via Internet:

There will be few readers, but an infinite number of hearers, who will listen from their own homes to the spoken paper, to the spoken book. University students will listen to their lectures while they lie in bed, and, as now with us, will not know their professors even by sight.

... We shall permit a man to have a copy of a manuscript when he has first had one of another and older manuscript and when the latter, which is about equal in value to the first, has already been given up to the library, which will thus lose none of its property. (p. 13)

Biagi was really aware of the important advantages that would result from “the library of the nations” realised by this international cooperation for library scholars (Biagi 1904):

To be able to compare the various texts and to have the various readings of them under one’s eye is an inestimable benefit; but the true philologist will never be contented with simply studying these facsimiles, however perfect they may be; he will want to examine for himself the ancient parchments, the time-yellowed papers, to study the slight differences between the inks, the varieties in the handwritings, the evanescent glosses in the margins. (p. 14)

According to Biagi, two aspects of international cooperation are of strategic importance: professional education and international associations.

Education of librarians

An international library school was in the vision of Biagi who writes (Biagi 1906):

The library work is much more complicated than we can expect and it requires much more energy, knowledge and patience than that of the teacher.

Biagi also affirmed (Biagi 1904):

The libraries are also with us the laboratory of science; and librarianship is now considered as a profession, no longer as a pastime or a sinecure. I hope to start this year in Florence an international library school, for the study of ancient culture and of American improvements, in a friendly exchange of mutual aids. (p. 59)

More recent discussions have taken place within IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) and FID (International Federation for Documentation) but without concrete programs until 1993, when UNESCO assumed the role of sponsoring Agency (Wedgeworth 1993). The idea of international education was certainly too advanced in 1904. Biagi himself was not able to start library education at the university, but he had been teaching courses in the National Library of Florence since 1883 (Sorbelli 1916; Sorbelli 1926). However, now it is possible to start again with the plan of international university education for a new role of the library in a global society (Davis 1987, 2005; Bramley 1981). The International dimension of library education is one of the pillars of internationalisation, still to be enforced and realised. The other pillar, following Biagi ideas, is the International Library Association.

International library organisations

Biagi said (Biagi 1904):

There are many international questions which cannot be resolved in these rare congresses, and which deserve a continuous preparation and care. Such a federation would constitute a strong and powerful organization, worthy of consideration and respect. There are leagues of tradesmen, why not a league of learned men? (p. 60)

The suggestion that the time was right for an international federation was “in everyone’s mind” during the S. Louis ALA Conference and took practical shape in the recommendation of the ALA Council for the appointment of a Committee (1904).

Believing that international co-operation which has already done so much to promote interests common to all nations may be expected to be effective in the field with which we are concerned, be it resolved that the incoming Executive Board be requested to appoint a special

Committee of five to consider plans for the promotion of international co-operation among libraries; that the committee be directed to ascertain whether the Library Associations and Bibliographic Societies of other countries are disposed to entertain favourably such a proposal that the Committee be instructed to report to the next annual meeting of the Association. (p. 576)

IFLA began in 1927 with the establishment of the International Committee and in 1929 with the first International Conference in Italy. The first core programmes of IFLA followed the lines of activity indicated by Biagi for internationalisation such as: Universal availability of publication (UAP), Universal Bibliographic control (UBC), Core Activity on Preservation and Conservation (PAC), Action for development for Library Programmes (ALP), Universal dataflow and telecommunications core activity (UDT now ICADS).

International librarianship today

International cooperation related to document supply, bibliographic standards, preservation and other technical areas will undoubtedly remain an important motivation to internationalisation. Since 1904, when Biagi stated his ideas, many libraries started sharing resources in different countries. The concept of library cooperation is at the heart of today’s definition of internationalisation (Havard-Williams 1972):

I define international librarianship as cooperative activity in the field of librarianship done for the benefit of the individual librarian in the whole of the world, and done frequently by the likes of you and me. (p. 170)

International relations among countries is another concept related to internationalisation. According to Stueart (Stueart 2007), international librarianship

connotes development of various kinds of relationships, intellectual, cultural and professional, among individuals and groups from more than one country. (p. 4)

Today the idea of internationalisation is – of course – much wider than the idea of cooperation and international relationships. The application of the Information and Communication Technologies has extended the complexity and the role of the librarian as far as including access to all the available resources. This implies a greater importance of the International Library Associations and of the international dimension of library

education as Biagi had already foreseen. Lor (Lor 2008) defines international librarianship as:

First, it refers loosely to the international activities categorised above, regardless of how systematically or scientifically they are pursued or described. Secondly, international librarianship as a field of study or an academic sub-discipline, refers to, in a narrower sense:

- the systematic study of similarities and differences between countries and their causes;
- international relations and influences; and
- international cooperation and the role of international organisations.

Carroll and Harvey (Carroll and Harvey 2001) suggest that innovation is a new reason for internationalisation: “International librarianship is about the new ideas in libraries being developed in the twentieth Century” (p. ix).

Although North America academic libraries are the driving force behind many innovations in the LIS field and are the source of most of the new thinking within the discipline, some authors now suggest that librarians in other countries have sometimes to deal with certain issues before they become critical in the United States;

hence there will be times that the flow of information will travel in the other direction (Calvert and Cullen 2001).

In conclusion, we can use the words of Wedgeworth, IFLA Past President, about Biagi in the World Encyclopedia (Wedgeworth 1993). Wedgeworth has used the idea of internationalisation of Biagi for opening the IFLA Conference in Havana (Wedgeworth 1994):

Providing the means for many more libraries and librarians to actively participate in the “virtual reality” of Biagi’s vision will bring benefits to all members of the IFLA community. Remaining steadfast in support of the principles that guide IFLA and in our commitment to assist in the development of libraries and librarianship worldwide will replace the present uncertainty with a renewed sense of purpose within the federation.

¹ The International Congress of Arts and Sciences was held in St. Louis, on September 19-25, 1904.

² The presentation of Biagi has been published in “Library Journal” (Biagi 1904) and in the ALA Proceedings (Howard and Münsterberg 1906). Biagi translated and diffused his presentation also in Italy (Biagi 1905a, 1905b).



Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence: the reading room planned by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Guido Biagi directed this important library from 1895 to 1923

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