Book Review

Parents of Invention: The Development of Library Automation Systems in the late 20th Century

Author: Christopher Brown-Syed
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Over the past 25 years, a great deal of information and research has been published on the history of library automation throughout the world. The notable works in this arena are Library automation: issues and applications by D Reynolds (1985), Historical studies in information science by TB Hahn and Micheal Buckland (1998), An Introduction to Computer-based Library System by LA Tedd (1993), and Introduction to Automation for Librarians (1999) by William Saffady.

In this mix comes this new book talking about the history of library automation, and the people associated with it in the last quarter of 20th century by Christopher Brown-Syed, professor in Seneca College in Toronto, Canada, and Editor of the journal Library and Archival Security. Dr. Brown-Syed is a former employee of the pioneering library system vendors Plessey and Geac.

This book claims to fill a gap in the literature of librarianship, which for the most part neglects or covered in the automation of those day-to-day processes that are viewed as being of no particular scholarly concerns and are taken as givens. The author also claims to have described the library automation in the phase of minicomputer and the cooperation among librarians, programmers, archivists and other ILS group during those days. This book is targeted to the library students and librarians of today.

This book is organized around a series of interviews of librarians, computer programmers, and sales persons. The major part of this work comes from the PhD thesis of the author.

The book spreads over eight chapters including one contributory concluding chapter by Louise O’Neill bringing the story up to date with a discussion of current developments in library automation including open source and open access.

The first chapter, ‘Origin of magic’ primarily based on the interviews deals with the foundation work done in the mainframe era for library automation. The ILS is referred here as magic that could mechanize every aspect of running a library and that too when only mainframe were available computers. Dr. Brown-Syed categorized the mainframe era as era of conceptualization, minicomputer phase as era of commercialization, and era of consolidation characterized by microcomputer. This chapter explores the earlier efforts in automation, pioneer library automation companies in which Geac was well known and popular. The chapter also includes some major events of mainframe era such as establishment of OCLC, Western Library Network (WLN), Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), BALLOTS, and many more.

Chapter two, ‘Customers’ perspectives’, is an interesting chapter dealing with customer’ views on ILS, based on an interview of Rona Wade, CEO of Australian library consortium UNILINC earlier known as CLANN. This chapter cites a number of interesting events of those days and the problems faced by librarians. Dr. Syed provides storyline of library automation in a very effective manner by providing live example of CLANN. The most interesting portion of this chapter is ‘CLANN goes online’ where he talks about library consortia. CLANN was acting as a library consortia by providing a number of libraries access to a mainframe and helping them to automate their activities. Dr. Brown-Syed also narrates the story of CD ROM uses in libraries, development of AUSMARC and INTMARC, and many databases including ovid, ERIC, and INSPEC.

Chapter three, ‘at the interface: librarians and vendor environment’, explores the story of the librarians who worked for the automation companies. This chapter also bases on the interviews of the librarians who worked as trainers and project managers. Author here differentiates today’s installation and configuration to that of minicomputer’s phase. The whole chapter discusses the experiences of librarians who worked as trainers and project managers.
Chapter four ‘the nature of the vendor’s work’ and chapter five ‘on company time’ discuss the experiences of the employees of automation companies about the nature of work in the company, their colleagues, working environments, job satisfaction, rules and regulation, facilities and perks, problems and challenges, their learning etc. In totality these are good chapters to know to real experiences of people working for automating in tough situations that lead to present automation systems.

Chapter six,’transformations,’ is the lengthiest chapter of the book. This part introduces the readers to various utilities and technologies used for library automation and their replacements. Automation during mainframe era, batch processed circulation process using punch cards, automation systems provided by Geac and Plassy automation companies, and various technical, technological aspects of transformation, bibliographic data, and computer codes are discussed here. This chapter also lists various computers and their peripherals available in that era.

Chapter seven,’consolidation and lasting achievements’ is related to automation companies, their services, and developments. Author, in this chapter, talks about a number of companies, their rise and fall, i.e. Plassy was acquired by Geac, and Geac again acquired by Informa. 1980s and 1990s saw rise of many other automation companies i.e. Sun, InMagic, HYTELNET etc., out of those some were in existence for short period while a few still exists. Open source development made a great impact on ILS. Development of Linux, LAMP, Java, and Python helped highly in cost reduction. A brief account of revolutions in Information Technologies, i.e. Development of Open Source Software, World Wide Web, GUI based Operating System, Open Access etc. conclude the chapter.

In her contributory concluding chapter, ‘the future of library technology’ Louise O’Neil explains some of the ongoing innovation taking place in the field of library automation. She discusses the work being done in library automation in present, and provides insights into the future of library automation. The content of this chapter is highly talked today e.g. open source software, open access, web 2.0, web 3.0 etc.

The book has following features;
- Interviews with CEOs of libraries and computer companies, programmers, librarians, and library directors from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- References to published material and memoranda and recourse to actual programming code and output from systems of the period.
- Photographs of computer machine rooms depicting minicomputer equipment described in the text.
- A glossary of acronyms, abbreviations, and special terms used in library automation.
- A bibliography of articles and monographs on historical and current aspects of library automation.

In conclusion, I can say that it is a good reference for LIS students and library professionals, providing a historical explanation of the rise and fall of mainframe and minicomputer based ILS systems. This book provides primary accounts that supports and contradict prevailing description in the literature of the profession.

The big drawback of the book is that it has highly overlooked 1990s period. The title of book surely gives us a clue that it must be talking about modern library software including open source software, and World Wide Web, but except in the concluding chapter author misses this totally. Moreover, this book is limited to the systems of Canada and Australia, though, sometimes it talks about ILS of USA but it misses out Europe. Lastly, it gives good account of ILS in Canada, USA, and Australia that gives us an experience of ILS of last thirty to forty years that can be very helpful for the readers who want to study the automation of mainframe and minicomputer era.

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