

From the Chair

Benjamin Aldred

I was a folklorist before I was a librarian. And that means the first thing that comes to mind when I hear ‘round table’ isn’t ALA organizational structure, but Arthurian legend. While those things might feel worlds apart, a folklorist will tell you that legends are ostensibly historical stories that can provide an interpretive framework for contemporary experiences, the way we talk about the past is how we make sense of the present. So I think that stories of Arthur and his knights can provide relevant perspectives on GODORT and its greater role. I don’t just mean that government information librarians are heroic figures, though I won’t correct anyone else who says so, I mean that thinking about round table narratives can help us better understand round table realities.

One offbeat way to interpret the concept of the round table is as a community of practice, centered around a group of professionals(knights) doing a similar mission driven job(providing protection for the kingdom). The round table exists for the knights to share and discuss events from different parts of the country, to enlist aid when challenges exceed what one knight can handle on their own, and to find ways to encourage each other in the greater mission. In this framework, it’s easy to see that many of their successes come from shared egalitarian governance(the round table as a metaphor for equal status) and a focus on mentoring and professional development(Percival’s story, going from aspiring squire to grail finder), successes that GODORT would do well to emulate.

The round table is also a story of diverse perspectives and experiences helping the greater good. While dark ages Britain may seem like a homogenous and small place, the travel time from Cornwall to Orkney would be nearly a month, and the people spoke two different languages. The legend of the round table is one of bringing together different people to recognize the differing needs of their populations. Similarly, individual knights brought different experiences and skills that helped the greater whole succeed. Some problems were handled by designated groups in order to make use of particular interest and expertise. I’m not saying that Galahad, Bors and Percival were part of the Grail Quest Task Force, we don’t have the minutes to prove it wasn’t an ad hoc committee or interest group, but bringing together different skills proved vital to success. Additionally, many variations on the tales include international members from near and far, showing the importance of international perspectives even in a time thought of as highly insular.

Ultimately, the story of the round table is a story about national identity. My favorite scene in Monty Python and the Holy Grail is the scene where Arthur comes into conflict with a peasant over the nature of local governance. Are they an autonomous collective or a feudal monarchy? Do they have a concept of central government or merely local organization? Most importantly, do they understand themselves as “Britons.” This scene duplicates historical arguments hotly debated at the time about the formation of national identity. But as government information librarians, we understand that the sense of shared national identity often relies on materials shared by a central organization, materials that tell the story of the country, the state, or even the locality as a cohesive entity. The legend of the round table is a story shared about the value of national unity and collaboration, similar to the one that government information librarians share as they help people access the materials they need. While our approach to national stories may owe more to Benedict Anderson than Sir Thomas Malory, both help people conceive of the greater population in a way that brings people together.

The last way that I will stretch this metaphor is reflecting on the lessons I hope to take as chair of GODORT, in contrast with Arthur’s mistakes. I think that we have better succession planning than Camelot, and I look forward to both working with Kian Flynn as past chair and Andie Craley as chair-elect. I think GODORT benefits from not enforcing ranks the way a feudal monarchy does, though there is always work to do to make sure that all library workers who work with government information can be a part of this community, a goal I hope to work on in my time as chair.

This is not a golden age for librarians in the United States of America. We face challenges more extensive and serious than any of us have faced before. But the round table gives us a place to gather, a place to collaborate, a symbol that we can look to when we worry that we are alone in the battle. And it is a place where all voices are welcome as we try to forge a new future. I look forward to working with all of you in the year to come.

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