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The Centenary of "Madame Documentation": Suzanne Briet, 1894-1989.

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Abstract: This is a biographical account of Suzanne Briet, 1884-1989, librarian, documentalist, historian, organizer, and feminist. One of the first few women appointed as librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Briet was a leader in the development of Documentation in the 1930s and until she retired in 1954. Her manifesto on the nature of Documentation, *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (Paris, 1951), remains significant for information science theory.

This year was the centenary of the birth, on February 1, 1894 in France, of Renée-Marie-Hélène-Suzanne Briet, a significant pioneer of information science in the days when it was called documentation. She was known for a while under her married name, as Suzanne Dupuy (or Dupuy-Briet).

Briet qualified as a secondary school teacher of English and History, but after teaching in Annaba, Algeria, from 1917 to 1920, she became a librarian. Qualifying in 1924, she was one of the first three women appointed as professional librarians in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The feminization of librarianship occurred later in France than in the USA, essentially between the two World Wars. In addition, many new ideas were being introduced at that time, some influenced by North American practice and encouraged by the Paris Library School that operated, under American Library Association sponsorship, from 1923 to 1929. It must have been an exciting and interesting situation in spite of the political and economic difficulties and, later, the Second World War. (See Maack 1983, Delmas 1992; *Documentaliste* 1993, Richards 1992).

Briet's main professional achievement at the Bibliothèque Nationale was symbolic of her interest in service and modernization: She planned, established, and supervised from 1934 to 1954 the Salle des Catalogues et Bibliographies, which was created by remodeling a basement (Cain 1936, photos on pp.33-34). Bibliographies which had previously been kept in closed stacks, she made available. She organized supplementary indexing and developed a bibliographic advisory service. The cross of the Legion of Honor was conferred on her in this room in 1950.

From the late 1920s onwards Briet was active nationally and internationally in the development of what was then called Documentation but would now be called Information Science. She participated in the founding, in 1931, and in the subsequent leadership of the Union Française des Organismes de Documentation (UFOD), the French analogue of the American Documentation Institute (founded in 1937 and now called the American Society for Information Science). She was a leader in developing professional education for this new speciality. She developed (and UFOD adopted) a plan for what would have been the first school

of Documentation / Information Science worldwide, had it been established. When, in 1951, such a school was established, the Institut National de Techniques de la Documentation, Briet was the founding Director of Studies (Delmas 1993). She became Vice President of the International Federation for Documentation (FID) and acquired the nickname "Madame Documentation".

In 1951 Briet published a remarkable manifesto on the nature of Documentation: *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (Briet 1951). It is a pamphlet of 48 pages. Part I, developing a distinctive theme of French documentation, sought to push the boundaries of the field beyond texts to include any material form of evidence. ("Is a living animal a document?" she asked.) Part II argued that a new and distinct profession was emerging. Part III urged the societal need for new and active information services. This tract may seem at first to be enthusiastic hyperbole, but Part I remains significant because it is still a challenge to orthodox views concerning the scope of information science (Buckland 1991). Her modernist perspective, highly compatible with modern semiotics, deserves attention now because it is different from, and offers an alternative to, the scientific, positivist view that has so dominated information science and which is increasingly questioned. A Spanish edition appeared in 1960 but it has not appeared in English and it has hardly ever been mentioned in the English-language literature. Verner Clapp (1952) wrote a perceptive review. Jesse Shera disparaged (and seems not to have understood) her ideas (Shera, 1966).

Briet toured the USA with Fulbright support in 1951-52, examining bibliographic services, reference service, and professional education. She concluded that Americans achieved excellence in documentation although few were familiar with that term. Briet recognized that, on account of the vigor of the special libraries movement in the USA, what might have been called a documentation center in France would generally have been regarded as a special library in the USA. This insight makes her trip reports interestingly and importantly different from the usual practice of making forced distinctions between documentation and librarianship. She gave a radio talk in Denver on how the USA had helped French libraries during the First World War and had her first contact with computers. (Briet 1952, 1954; also Anon. 1951; Briet 1976 pp.34-36).

Briet was a feminist and an effective organizer. In addition to UFOD, she established a women's Rotary club that achieved a membership of 8,000. She also became President of Union of European Women.

In 1954, at age 60, Briet took early retirement, apparently discouraged by a general resistance to new ideas. She left the library and information scene and started another career as historian. For nearly thirty years she wrote about the history of the Ardennes region in northern France, her ancestral homeland, and of individuals born there, including the brilliant young poet Arthur Rimbaud, whom she viewed as an enduring symbol of the human spirit ("Rimbaud notre prochain"). She wrote a sympathetic biography of Rimbaud's tough mother, a life of Jean, Comte de Montdejeux (a seventeenth century warrior), and much more.

Briet's writing reflects her upbringing and her social and cultural context. Her historical work is carefully documented. Her manifesto, however, is deliberately hortatory, like similar writings by her contemporaries: Persuasion is expected to follow from the arguments and facts presented—not from bibliographical footnotes. Thus a pivotal statement defining "document" as a form of evidence is attributed to "a thoughtful contemporary bibliographer" who is not identified. A quotation about how facts become "clothed" in texts is attributed to her friend, the

philosopher Raymond Bayer, but no citation is given. In 1976 she published her memoirs, a collection of wry, whimsical, and nostalgic anecdotes and observations arranged, appropriately for a documentalist, under keywords in alphabetical order (Briet 1976). For 25 years she had been in the forefront with the pioneers who were then the leaders of our field: Samuel Bradford, Watson Davis, Jean Gérard, Paul Otlet, Walter Schürmeyer, Jean Wyart, and others. Her memory would have been a prime source for that important, but neglected period, but there is no mention of any of those people and very little of that part of her life in her memoirs. For Briet it would probably have seemed boastful and in poor taste to have described her own achievements and it would have been improper and indiscrete to have commented on those of her colleagues.

She died at the age of 95 in Paris in 1989.

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- [In published version, a photograph of Suzanne Briet in the Salle des Catalogues et Bibliographies, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.]