

Preprint, revised April 10, 2005. Forthcoming in: Suzanne Briet. *What is Documentation?* Translated and Edited by Ronald E. Day and Laurent Martinet, with Hermina G.B. Angheliescu. Also includes: Critical Essay by Ronald E. Day, Biographical Note and Bibliography by Michael K. Buckland. (Scarecrow Press, forthcoming 2005.) This preprint may differ slightly from the published version

## A Brief Biography of Suzanne Renée Briet

Michael Buckland,  
School of Information Management and Systems,  
University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-4600

Suzanne Briet was born in Paris on February 1, 1894, but grew up in the Ardennes region in northern France. When married, during the 1930s, she used her married name, Suzanne Dupuy (or Dupuy-Briet), but then reverted to using the surname Briet. On at least one occasion she used Briet-Cartulat, adding her mother's maiden name.

Briet qualified as a secondary school teacher of English and History, but after teaching in 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. 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.

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 remodelling a basement<sup>1,2</sup>. 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 Management or 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 and Technology). 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Julien Cain, *Les transformations de la Bibliothèque nationale et le Dépôt annexe de Versailles* (Paris: Editions des bibliothèques nationales, 1936), 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Briet. Bibliography in the Basement. *Special Libraries* 41(1950): 52-55.

Techniques de la Documentation at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, Briet was the founding Director of Studies<sup>1,2</sup>. She became Vice President of the International Federation for Documentation (FID) and acquired the nickname “Madame Documentation.”

Briet’s remarkable manifesto on the nature of documentation, *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (“What is Documentation?”) (Paris: EDIT, 1951) is a pamphlet of 48 pages. Part I 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 it remains significant because it is still relevant to understanding the nature, scope, and societal impacts of documents and documentation<sup>3,4,5</sup>. Her modernist perspective, combined with 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<sup>6</sup> but it has not appeared in English until now and, until recently, it has hardly been mentioned in the English-language literature. Verner Clapp wrote a perceptive review<sup>7</sup>.

In 1954, at age 60, Briet took early retirement. She left the librarianship and documentation and concentrated on other interests. For another 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<sup>8</sup>. She wrote a sympathetic biography of Rimbaud's tough mother<sup>9</sup>, a

---

<sup>1</sup> “Les cours techniques de documentation,” *Journal of Documentation* 1, no. 2 (Sept. 1945): 89-92.

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Delmas, “Une fonction nouvelle: Genèse et développement des centres de documentation,” in *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises. [v. 4] Les bibliothèques au XXe siècle, 1914-1990*. ([Paris]: Promodis - Editions du cercle de la librairie, 1992), 178-93).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Buckland, “Information as Thing,” *Journal of the American Society of Information Science* 42, no. 5 (June 1991): 351-60.  
<http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/~buckland/thing.html> (26 March 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Buckland, “What is a ‘Document’?” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 48, no. 9 (Sept 1997): 804-9.  
<http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/~buckland/whatdoc.html> (26 March 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Ronald E. Day, *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Briet, *Que es la documentación?* [Transl. By Beatriz Favaro.] (Argentina, Santa Fé: Universidad nacional del Litoral. Facultad de ciencias jurídicas y sociales. Departamento del extensión universitaria, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Verner Clapp, [Review of *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?*] *Library of Congress. Information Bulletin* 11 (1952): 1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Briet, *Rimbaud notre prochain: genealogie, carte, document hors-texte* (Paris: Nouvelle éditions latins, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Briet, *Madame Rimbaud, essai de biographie, suivi de la correspondance de Vitalie Rimbaud-Cuif dont treize lettres inédites* Avant-siècle 5. (Paris: Lettres modernes, Minard, 1968).

life of Jean, Comte de Montdejeux (a seventeenth century warrior)<sup>1</sup>, some poetry, and much more. She died, aged 95, in Paris in 1989, largely forgotten in her professional field until a renewed interest in her ideas emerged during the 1990s.

Briet's historical and literary studies are carefully documented. Her *What is documentation?*, in contrast, is a manifesto. Persuasion is expected to follow from the arguments and facts presented, not from sources cited, nor from the authority of the author. 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. Briet writes with confidence, but, otherwise, there is little indication of what qualifications she brings. In fact, Briet generated some hundred publications in the sixty years from 1925 to 1985 and they reveal a wide range of interests and activities, but even knowing that does not adequately reveal how very well qualified she was to explain documentation. (See Selective Bibliography on pages ??-??.)

First, she had been deeply engaged in the documentation movement from the late 1920s onwards, serving on committees, developing professional education, participating in conferences, and serving as Vice President of the International Federation for Documentation and as Secretary-General of the French association for documentation, UFOD.

Second, Briet had a deep grounding in culture and the humanities. She had studied English and History and published literary studies and contributions to the regional history of the Ardennes. More relevant to her manifesto, she understood that technology and culture were deeply connected. She saw society and, therefore, culture, as being re-shaped by technology. The techniques of documentation in aiding and shaping intellectual work were, in her view, both a symptom of, and a contributory force within, the "industrialization" of knowledge workers. We can now see, in the impact of computers and telecommunications, how right she was.

Third, like other librarians at the Bibliothèque nationale, Briet was well connected in the intellectual world and, probably, more so than most because of her role in the Salle des catalogues, essentially a major reference library.

Fourth, like other leading figures in documentation, she was acutely aware of the importance of standards, collaboration, and interoperability. She helped coordinate standards development after the Second World War, she served on the International Standards Organisation T46 committee for Documentation, her Salle des catalogues served as secretariat of the development of a French cataloging code, and she was partly responsible for the development of that code. An overview of standards development in France in the postwar years commented in glowing terms on Briet's "remarkable erudition" and "inexhaustible patience"<sup>2</sup>.

Fifth, she understood how organizations worked. She was employed in the Bibliothèque nationale was a complex government agency, founded a successful Rotary club for women, was elected president of the Union of European Women and honorary president of the Amis de

---

<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Briet. 1960. *Le Marechal de Schulemberg: Jean III, comte de Montdejeux (1598-1671)*. (Les cahiers d'études ardennais 4). Mezières: Editions de la Société d'Études Ardennaises, Archives départementales, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> J. Birlé, "Quelques aspects de la normalisation française dans le domaine de la documentation," in International Federation for Documentation. 17th Conference, Berne, 1947. *Rapports* The Hague: F.I.D., 1 (1947): 103-7.

Rimbaud, in addition to her leadership roles in FID and UFOD.

Finally, she was an accomplished and experience professional: as a librarian, as an educator, as a scholar, and in related tasks. She curated a major exhibition, with more than a thousand exhibits and a detailed, annotated catalog, to mark the centenary of Rimbaud's birth<sup>1</sup>.

Briet was, in these ways, unusually well-qualified to ask and to answer the question *What is documentation?* In addition, a level of practical wisdom is reflected in her views of the relationship between librarianship and documentation, which seem to have been reinforced by her tour of the USA in 1951-52, examining bibliographic services, reference service, and professional education. She concluded that Americans achieved excellence in documentation even though few were familiar with that term. She 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 different from the usual practice of making forced distinctions between documentation and librarianship<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>.

In 1954 Briet wrote a noteworthy paper on the relationship between librarianship and documentation<sup>6</sup>. In her view, librarians and documentalists are not different in kind but in their emphasis: Librarians tend collections and develop bibliographic apparatus; documentalists are focus on advancing the intellectual work of the groups they serve. Differences in type of material selected, forms of indexing, and timeliness flow from that difference in emphasis. Reference librarians and special librarians occupy an intermediate position. There is a tinge of exasperation at the number of people who, instead, wanted to insist on unification or rigid partition. Written in the year she retired from the field, this paper can be seen as a professional swan song. If more people had adopted Briet's enlightened views the disruptive antagonisms between "traditional librarians" and "information science" in the ensuing decades might have avoided.

Her memoirs, *Entre Aisne et Meuse . . . et au delà* ("Between the Aisne and the Meuse . . . and beyond") are similarly understated<sup>7</sup>. She provides a collection of wry, whimsical, and nostalgic anecdotes and observations arranged, appropriately for a documentalist, under keywords in alphabetical order. For 25 years she had been in the forefront with the pioneers who were then the leaders in the field: Samuel Bradford, Watson Davis, Jean Gérard, Paul Otlet,

---

<sup>1</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale. *Arthur Rimbaud. Exposition organisée pour le centième anniversaire de sa naissance* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Briet, "Bibliothèques et centres de documentation technique aus Etats Unis: Notes d'un voyage de quatre mois (Octobre 1951 - Février 1952)," *ABCD Archives Bibliothèques Collections Documentation* 11 (1952): 299-308.

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Briet, "La formation professionnelle des bibliothécaires aus États-Unis. *ABCD Archives Bibliothèques Collections Documentation* 13 (1954): 337-340.

<sup>4</sup> "Madame Suzanne Briet," *Library of Congress. Information Bulletin*, 10, no. 45, (1951): 9.

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Briet, *Entre Aisne et Meuse . . . et au delà*, Les cahiers ardennais 22. (Charleville-Mezières: Société de Ecrivains Ardennais, 1976), 34-36.

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Briet, "Bibliothécaires et documentalists" *Revue de la documentation* 21, fasc. 2 (1954): 41-45.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Briet, *Entre Aisne et Meuse . . . et au delà*, Les cahiers ardennais 22. (Charleville-Mezières: Société de Ecrivains Ardennais, 1976), 34-36.

Walter Schürmeyer, Jean Wyart, . . . Her memory and insights would have been a wonderful source for us to understand better 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. Once again, one wants more, but, for Briet, it would have seemed boastful and in poor taste to have described her own achievements and improper and indiscrete to have commented on those of her colleagues.

#### Acknowledgement

I am grateful for help received from Samia Benidir, Michael Carpenter, J. Periam Danton, Ronald E. Day, and Mary Niles Maack.

This paper expands Michael Buckland, "The Centenary of 'Madame Documentation': Suzanne Briet, 1894-1989," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 46, no. 3 (April 1995):235-37, also published in French as "Le centenaire de 'Madame Documentation': Suzanne Briet, 1894-1989," *Documentaliste: Sciences de l'information* 32, no. 3 (mai/juin 1995): 179-81, and summarized as "Suzanne Briet, 1894-1989," in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de l'information et de la documentation*, [ed. by] Serge Cacaly. Collection REF. (Paris: Editions Nathan, 1997), 105-6.

The biographical details are based on the lengthy obituary of Briet by Renée Lemaître and Paul Roux-Fouillet, "Suzanne Briet (1894-1989)," *Bulletin d'Informations de l'Association des bibliothécaires français*, 144 (1989): 55-56. (1989), and also on:

Bruno Delmas, B. "L'INTD et son rôle dans la formation des documentalistes en France 1932-1993," *Documentaliste* 30 (1993): 218-26.

"Contributions à l'histoire de la Documentation en France," Special issue, *Documentaliste* 30, no. 4/5 (juillet-octobre 1993): 189-284.

Sylvie Fayet-Scribe, *Histoire de la documentation en France: Culture, science et technologie de l'information 1895-1937* (Paris: CNRS, 2000).

"Hommage à Madame Suzanne Briet," *Rimbaud vivant. Bulletin des Amis de Rimbaud* 26 (1987): 1-13. Includes portrait; Jean Guirec, "Suzanne Briet"; Pierre Petitfils, "Notre Présidente d'Honneur" [Briet bio-bibliography]; and a poem by S. Briet.

Maack, Mary Niles, "Women Librarians in France: The First Generation," *Journal of Library History* 18 (1983): 407-49.

———, "The Lady and the Antelope: Suzanne Briet's Contribution to the French Documentation Movement," *Library Trends* 52, no 4 (Spring 2004): 719-47.

Pamela Spence Richards, "Scientific Information in Occupied France, 1940-44," *Library Quarterly* 62 (1992): 295-305.