

Archival research on IFLA and FID, September-October 2025

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1. Introduction

With research funding kindly provided by the University of Pretoria, I was able to visit The Hague (the Netherlands) and Mons (Belgium) in September-October to continue my archival research into the history of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and IFLA's relationship with other organisations, including the International Federation for Information and Documentation (best known under its long-time initialism, FID). This was my third visit to the archives held in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB, the national library of the Netherlands) and my first to the archives held in the Mundaneum, in Mons, Belgium. In this report I set out my research aims, and what I found.

I am providing details on my use of the archives, so as to be of assistance to other members of [IFLA's Library History \(LibHist\) Special Interest Group \(SIG\)](#) and researchers who may want to work there on projects relating to the IFLA centenary.

2. Research aims and intended outputs

2.1 IFLA and the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation

With a view to IFLA's centenary in 2027, the LibHist SIG is conducting research on IFLA's history. Following a study of the sources and themes for the historiography of IFLA (Lor 2024b), I researched the relationship between IFLA and the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) of the League of Nations. Under the ICIC I include the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC, or "Paris Institute"), an executive agency for the ICIC sponsored by the French government and based in Paris. For the ICIC I searched its fully digitised archives that are made available online by the United Nations Library and Archives in Geneva. For the Paris Institute I was able to search its fully digitised archives, held by UNESCO in Paris, also online. For this research it was necessary to disentangle the various subcommittees and other entities of the ICIC and the Paris Institute, a task made more challenging because these organisations evolved quite rapidly. The archival sources are mainly in French and English, and creators of documents translated names of entities from one language to another and back again with scant regard for consistency. The entities relevant to my research have several names in each language.

In the first of what I intend to be several articles on the relationship between IFLA and the ICIC/Paris Institute, I focussed on the ICIC's Subcommittee on Science and Bibliography, a high-level committee (Marie Curie and Albert Einstein were among the members) concerned primarily with access to the scientific and scholarly literature (Lor 2024a). I am following this up with a study of the ICIC's variously named Expert Committee of Librarians and its

relations with the International Library Committee (the name of the annual meeting by which IFLA was generally known). This will be reported in an article currently in progress.

2.2 IFLA and the FID

I have a long-time interest in the FID, and was aware that, before the FID was dissolved in the course of 2000-2002¹, IFLA had offered it a proverbial rescue buoy, whereby FID's continuing activities would be accommodated in a special section or professional unit of IFLA. This was turned down and the FID no longer exists. One of my research aims for this visit was to search for relevant documents in the IFLA and FID archives. It is planned that this will be the subject of another article.

Until the FID was dissolved, IFLA and FID had been both competitors and collaborators. Over decades, starting in 1946, UNESCO had sought to coordinate their activities to the mutual benefit of all three. This proved difficult. I would have liked to study this tripartite relationship, but it turns out that UNESCO's own archives (as distinct from those of its predecessor, the Paris Institute) have not yet been digitised to any significant extent. Therefore, research on this period would entail at least one quite lengthy visit to the UNESCO archives in Paris. This is expensive, and best left to researchers based in Europe.

2.3 IFLA in transnational civil society

Therefore, I am focussing my research on the inter-war period (1918-1939), considering the relations between IFLA and other international bodies in the field of libraries and information, in the context of the intellectual and political milieu and the development of transnational civil society in that period. The most significant of these bodies were the International Institute of Bibliography (from 1931 International Institute of Documentation, IIB, and from 1937 International Federation for Documentation, FID), and the ICIC/Paris Institute. I have submitted a proposal for a chapter on this in the IFLA centennial volume. The chapter is provisionally entitled "A newcomer in transnational civil society: IFLA between the two world wars".

3. The FID archives

Since 1992, the work of maintaining and publishing the FID's internationally used classification scheme, the [Universal Decimal Classification](#) (a faceted classification originally derived from that of Melvil Dewey), has been the responsibility of an independent organisation, the [UDC Consortium](#) (UDCC), based in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague. The UDCC survived the demise of the FID and, in addition to its own extensive archives, is the custodian of the sizable FID archives, from approximately the 1930s onwards. Earlier material is known to be held in the Mundaneum. Until 1937 the FID was based in

¹ Sources differ on exactly what happened. According to Forest W. Horton (2009) at the end of 2000, FID President Martha Stone announced that the FID Council had voted to dissolve the organisation with effect from 1 January 2001. I have not found this resolution. It appears that FID's registration in the Netherlands was scrapped, but that it is listed without further details in the database of the Union of International Associations as having "ceased activities due to lack of finance" but "continues to exist as a legal entity". Some sources give 2002 as the date of FID's dissolution.

Brussels, Belgium, but in that year its headquarters were moved to The Hague. It is not clear which records were transferred to The Hague at this time.



In The Hague the FID archives are housed with those of the UDCC in a densely packed, enclosed space in the basement of the KB stacks. The UDC's Editor-in-Chief, Dr Aida Slavic, travels to The Hague every year to sort out the approximately 120 archive boxes of material which were left at the KB when the FID was dissolved. The UDC being the UDCC's core business, she and her helpers have concentrated on separating UDC-related materials from those relating to the FID generally. This is an ongoing exercise. Most of the archive boxes still have mixed (FID and UDC) contents. Many of them are full to capacity, difficult to handle and heavy. There are also files housed in a number of locked metal cabinets standing outside in the corridor. Some of the material relates to personnel and other sensitive matters. Hence the archives can only be accessed under supervision when UDCC staff are present. As there are no staff to do this, it

is necessary to arrange for access well before the time. There are two inventory lists, which direct the user to numbered boxes. They are useful but neither detailed nor comprehensive.

I arranged with Dr Slavic to spend the week of 30 September to 4 October at this archive. She kindly assisted me in my search for relevant boxes on the archives shelves as well as relevant files in the metal cabinets. I was allowed to take the material to a vacant office made available to me by IFLA, to work through the FID material there, make notes, and identify material for scanning, some of which Dr Slavic and two visiting colleagues, Ana Vukadin and Anna Stevanovic, did for me. I was also allowed to use IFLA's scanner. A Swedish researcher, Arwid Lund, was also working in the FID archives at the time I was there, and he referred me to some useful boxes. I am most grateful for their generous time and assistance!

Although material in the FID archives mainly dates from after WW2, my search for material from the inter-war period did yield useful materials, in particular, a box file on the sessions of the IIB/IID/FID council meetings from 1922 to 1939. In some of the FID council papers mention is made of relations with IFLA, including brief reports on cooperation with IFLA in respect of bibliographical standardisation. There are also some comments reflecting attitudes to the relationship between documentation and libraries. In these meetings a number of personalities featured whom I had noted earlier as being active and influential in IFLA and in the ICIC's Subcommittee on Science and Bibliography and Expert Committee on Libraries. This suggests that a prosopographical study of key personalities in these bodies could be of interest. One such particularly interesting and tragic individual is Dr Hugo Anders Krüss, the Director of the Prussian State Library, an impressive leader, who played prominent roles in

the ICIC's committees, in the founding of IFLA and as its Deputy president in the late 1930s, in FID, and in promoting the international library congress in Germany. The Congress was to be held in Berlin, Leipzig and Mainz in 1940, to coincide with the 500th anniversary of the invention of printing in the West. (Krüss subsequently played a prominent role in the Nazi looting of cultural treasures during the War, and committed suicide in 1945 as the Russian forces closed in on Berlin.) I also noted that at the August 1939 FID council meeting, just three weeks before the outbreak of WW2, the planning of the international congress in Germany in 1940 was discussed as if nothing was the matter and without any evidence of qualms about the prospect of meeting in Nazi Germany.

For the final years of the FID, I was able to access very useful material from 1995 to 2000. In particular, minutes and agendas of the FID's Council meetings from 1998 to 2000 provided very valuable insights into the financial and management crisis which ultimately led to FID's end. From minutes and correspondence it is evident that most members of the FID council were oblivious to the crisis. Among other problems, the FID had failed to pay its employees in full and in time. This contravention of Dutch law had serious consequences, which were apparently not understood by some council members from other jurisdictions.

4. IFLA Archives

I spent my second week in The Hague, 7-11 October, working on the IFLA archives. IFLA's archives are in the basement of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, close to those of the FID. I found the archives better organized than those of the FID, arranged according to the various categories of documents. It is an extensive archive, dating from the early 1920s. According to IFLA's Communication Manager, Louis Takács, it comprises approximately 250 linear metres. In addition to boxes of archival material (administrative and financial records, correspondence, agendas, minutes, reports, conference programmes and papers, etc.) it includes material of various types, such as pamphlets, leaflets, posters, press clippings, bound volumes (such as the IFLA Publications series), glass plate negatives, photographs, slides, audio recordings and CD-ROMs. (This is not an exhaustive list.)

Louis Takács, who is very well informed about the contents of the IFLA archives and who had helped me during my previous visits, again provided me with materials from the archives, bringing items I had identified to a vacant office at the IFLA wing for my use. Many staff members were working from home, but Louis came into the office specially to help me. Several colleagues from my time as Secretary General (2005-2008) were there and very hospitable and helpful. Last year I had identified relevant archive boxes and lever arch files to explore, and on this occasion I was able to peruse all the material from 1927 through 1939 which I had identified for the article mentioned in 2.1 above, completing my search for archival material relating to the interwar period.

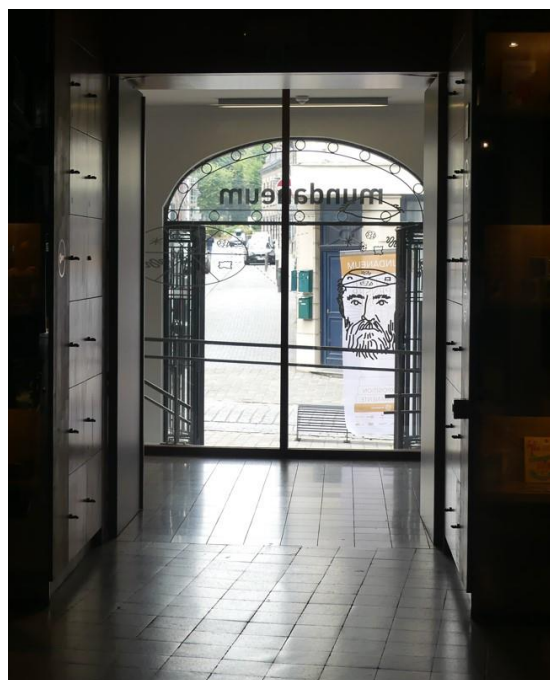
As mentioned above, I had decided not to pursue the post-1945 material relating to IFLA's relations with UNESCO, a topic which I had discussed in an earlier article based on secondary literature (Lor 2012). There is a great deal of very useful secondary source material for those wishing to research this relationship, in particular work by Boyd Rayward (e.g. Rayward 1993; 2024). In the meantime, all the IFLA *Actes*, the proceedings of all the annual sessions (meetings) of IFLA's International Library Committee, have by now been scanned by at least one US university. They can be accessed online via the Hathi Trust (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000058958>).

In addition, I was able to study files from the period 1998 to 2001 relating to the FID's financial crisis, supplementing the material I had found in the FID archives. These included reports to IFLA's Executive Board by a senior staff member of the KB who served on FID's Council and was very involved in developing and proposing IFLA's 'rescue buoy'.

It may be that other desiderata will be identified, but as of now, I am confident that I have the necessary material from the IFLA and FID archives.

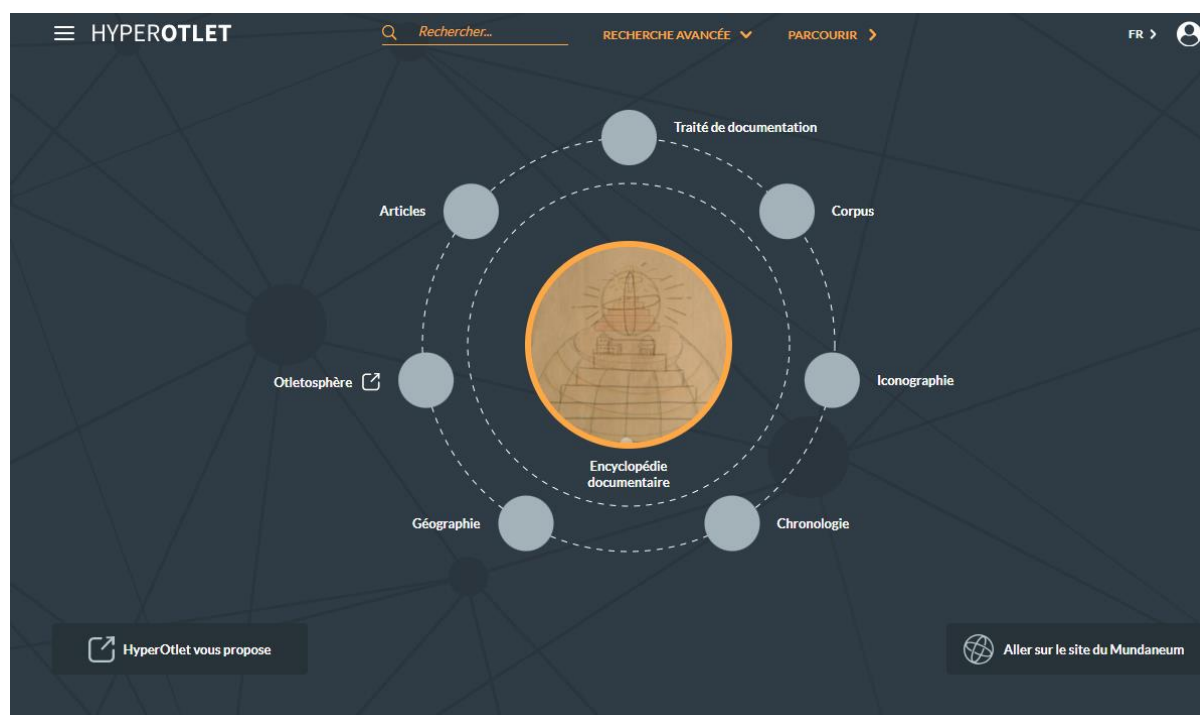
5. Mundaneum

The last four days of my trip (14-17 October) were spent in Mons, Belgium, at the [Mundaneum](#), "Centre d'archives de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles & Espace muséal", an archives centre and museum of Belgium's francophone Wallonia-Brussels Federation. It contains museum artefacts from the original Mundaneum established by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine in the Palais Mondial in Brussels, a large number of catalogue cabinets containing the surviving part of the *Répertoire universel bibliographique universel*, and an archive of Otlet's own voluminous papers. Some but by no means all of these relate to the International Institute of Bibliography (IIB), founded by Otlet and Henri La Fontaine in 1895. It was renamed the International Institute of Documentation (IID) in 1931, and in 1937 as the International Federation for Documentation. It changed its name again in 1988 to International Federation for Information and Documentation, but is best known as the FID, from the initialism of its French name, *Fédération internationale de documentation*.) The IIB formed part of a cluster of somewhat entangled organisations created by Otlet and La Fontaine. These included the *Office de bibliographie internationale*, based in Brussels and financed by the Belgian government, the Central Office of International Organisations, founded in 1907 and still in existence as the Union of International Organisations, and the Mundaneum, major parts of which are today housed in Mons, Belgium. (This account is necessarily over-simplified.)



I had gone to Mons hoping to supplement what I had been able to find in The Hague by finding missing material such as agendas and minutes of the IIB/IID/FID from the period until 1937. In that year the headquarters of the FID were moved from Brussels to The Hague. Otlet, founder and moving spirit behind the FID, remained in Brussels, firing off ideas for the expansion of the UDC, continuing his theoretical work on the conceptual basis of documentation, and pursuing his visionary and idealist international activities in various spheres. He left behind a vast and fascinating collections of letters, speeches, notes, draft expansions of the UDC, drawings, organisation diagrams, etc., predominantly in French.

These can selectively be accessed online using the [HyperOtlet](#) platform (mainly in French). I found the system difficult to use. The explanation on *the Accueil* (welcome) page is not very informative, but it appears that HyperOtlet is the product of an interdisciplinary francophone hypertext [project](#) focussing on Otlet's seminal *Traité de documentation* (Otlet 1934), in which he elaborated the science of documentation. This limits the scope of HyperOtlet.



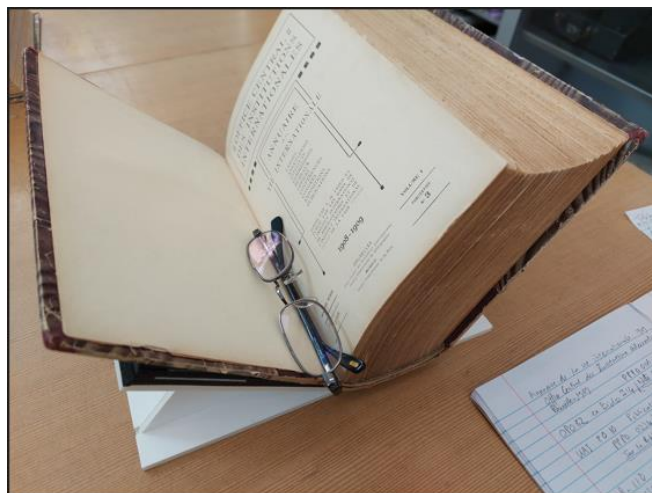
Mme Stéphanie Manfroid, head of the archives, had already informed me that FID archives are not held in the Mundaneum. The archives held here are those of Otlet. He is at the centre of the collection, and in according to archival principles, it is organised as closely as possible to how he left it. There is a fair amount of information about the IIB/IID/FID, but only as seen from Otlet's standpoint. There are no chronological sets of IIB or ID agendas and minutes, only items among Otlet's notes and speeches, scattered throughout his huge mass of papers.

This only really hit home to me when I sat down to work my way through a large number of boxes which Mme Manfroid had selected as most likely to meet my needs. In a long, slow process, I worked through crammed boxes of Otlet's numbered notes, finding a huge amount of fascinating material, useful as background, but not what I had set out to find. In the event, it gave me valuable insights into Otlet's worldview and the intellectual milieu of his time. Mme Manfroid kindly scanned many items for me or downloaded numbered notes that had been digitised.

As I progressed I found more and more useful material, including correspondence between Otlet, Godfrey Dewey (son of Melvil Dewey) and Frits Donker Duyvis, the Dutch chemical engineer who had taken over as secretary general of the FID, based at the new headquarters in The Hague. The correspondence corroborates other sources I had found in the ICIC/IIIC archives which pointed to a growing divide between the practical-minded Donker Duyvis and the visionary creator of the UDC, Otlet.

Another find was the massive *Annuaire de la vie internationale* of 1908-1909, edited by Alfred Fried, Otlet and La Fontaine, a directory of international organisations (available on [Gallica](#), the French digital library) which continues to be published annually by the Union of International Associations and still exists today as the [Yearbook of international organizations](#). In this edition there is a long, encyclopaedic article (over 120 pages) by Otlet on international associations, “*L’organisation internationale et les associations internationales*” (Otlet 1909). I had not been aware of it. It will be useful in framing my proposed book chapter.

In my last day at the Mundaneum, I spent time looking through its collection of books about Otlet and the Mundaneum. It proved to be a treasure trove, including material which would be difficult to access from South Africa. Mme Manfroid kindly spent a good deal of time scanning relevant chapters and pages I had selected as most relevant. This is



excellent background material for the book chapter referred to in par. 2.3 above. I am most grateful to Mme Manfroid, who herself has written extensively about the Mundaneum, for spending so much time and going to so much trouble to assist me during my brief visit.

For any librarian or information scientist interested in the history and theoretical development of the information sciences, a pilgrimage to the Mundaneum is a must.

6. Conclusion

This research trip was very productive. Working through my notes and the materials I collected, is likely to keep me occupied for the rest of this year and maybe longer. I am very grateful to all the kind librarians and archivists who have gone out of their way to help me, to the University of Pretoria for research funding, and to Prof Theo Bothma for facilitating it.

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