ON EDITING THE INDEXER

John L. Thornton

When I was seduced into becoming Editor of *The Indexer*, I little thought that I was to hold that office for five years (having settled for one!), or that at the end of that term I should be inveigled into addressing an audience on the subject. An ex-editor, traditionally retiring, emerges to discuss the trials and tribulations, and the joy and satisfaction, in varying proportions, associated with the production of a journal.

Quite obviously the job of an editor is to edit. Perhaps you have visions of him sitting surrounded by mountains of contributions through which he wades knee-deep, sorting the wheat from the chaff, returning (with regret!) ninety per cent. of the articles with the inevitable rejection slip, and re-writing the remainder to fit his own peculiar pattern of English presentation. The resultant issue bears his hall-mark on every page, a stereotyped, soul-less conglomeration of print and paper that is often hailed as a masterpiece of editorial efficiency. My idea of editing was to present the items as formulated by the contributors, correcting obvious typing errors (authors' mistakes!), clarifying material if I had difficulty in understanding it—visualising readers being similarly placed—but letting the author expound his views in his own words. I was even content to let him use his own spelling, as long as he used it consistently throughout the article, for the *Oxford English Dictionary* permits many variant spellings—and who would question the *O.E.D.?*

First, however, it was necessary to obtain the material. There were no mountains of material. Almost every article was prised out of the author. Many friends were approached, many promises were made, and two potential contributors to my first issue still remain potential contributors!

Our main source of material has been the discussion meetings, and most of the speakers were approached for the manuscripts of their talks. It was safest to secure these at the end of meetings, to avoid lengthy delays, certain of which extended beyond my term of office! It was difficult to secure sufficient matter for some issues, and only once did I have an article left over when the issue was printed.

When I became editor I hoped eventually to produce *The Indexer* quarterly instead of six-monthly, but it soon became obvious that although I was able to increase the size of the issues, there was no possibility of publishing four issues in a year. As it was, I had to solicit shorter items as fill-ups, provoke correspondence, write most of the reviews, and fill in pages with lists of references on indexing, and similar items.

*The Indexer* is the journal of the Society of Indexers; it is your journal. It is there for you to read and enjoy. You will learn much from it (I certainly have done, and do), but you will also find views with which you disagree, methods which you can improve upon as the result of your experience, and questions which you would like to pose. Why not write them down and send them to the Editor, together with any apt questions, personalia, and similar

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A paper read at a Discussion Meeting on February 18th, 1965.
items, which he will welcome? Membership of our Society is very mixed, and we endeavour to cater for every type of indexer. Some of us at one time thought that book-indexing was the only type, and that our methods were the only possible path to the production of efficient, comprehensive indexes. We now appreciate the wider implications of indexing all sorts of material, in all subjects, in various languages, by mechanical as well as by the traditional methods, and realise that we can learn much from our colleagues. Few of us are too set in our ways to believe that old methods cannot be improved upon, and that the standard of indexes (even those we compile ourselves!) cannot be bettered. This can best be done by taking stock of ourselves, by a re-evaluation of the entire problem of indexing, and a fresh approach to the subject. This will not be accomplished overnight. It must proceed gradually by keeping abreast of modern advances in technique, by experimenting with new ideas, by discussing mutual problems with fellow indexers, and by reading and contributing to The Indexer.

Our journal usually contains several main articles, some shorter items, correspondence, Society information and annual reports, book reviews, and an editorial (unless this is crowded out). I have mentioned that when I was editor I wrote most of the book reviews (not outside my field as a librarian, I suggest). Another excuse I offer is the fact that book reviews should be published promptly, and some books received before I became editor remain unreviewed. But my main reason was the fact that I believe an editor should be responsible for all the material printed in the journal he edits, and I have a particular interest in book reviews. I contend that all book reviews should be signed, and that they should present a fair evaluation of the item under consideration. Reviewers have a duty to the readers, who may be considering reading, or even buying, the book. They have a duty to the author who has spent considerable time and study in producing his ‘masterpiece’. They also have a duty to the publisher who has invested his money in the book, and who hopes at least to see it back. These obligations should rest heavy on the souls of those hypercritical reviewers who slang every book they read, put forward their own views on subjects only remotely connected with the book under consideration, and obliquely imply that they themselves could write an immensely better tome on the subject—but never do! If a book is frankly bad, obsolete, incomplete, irresponsible, ill-produced, and lacks an index, by all means say so, and prove your point, but first take the trouble to read it. Make sure you know what the author sets out to do, that you appreciate the field the book should cover, and the audience for whom it is intended. Review the book for what it is, not for the book you hoped to find; there is still room for your *magnum opus*—if you ever find yourself prepared to spend years of research, abstracting, drafting, re-drafting, typing and proof-reading, before holding your brain-child between boards in your hand, proudly at first, until some upstart reviewer knocks hell out of it without really understanding its significance. A good reviewer should try to find something in every book to praise; he is dealing with part of the soul of the author. The author should remember that very few good books have been ‘killed’ by reviewers, and that regular readers soon know which reviewers, and which journals, appear to delight in castigation. I suggest that it is the editor who should ultimately
be held responsible for severe criticism appearing in his journal, and that he should certainly ensure that it is not libellous. Many reviews fall little short of this, implying incompetence or worse on the part of the author.

There is another type of review which I detest. The signed review by another writer on the subject who is likely to find himself at the other end of the stick, and is afraid to voice his true opinion. This is known as 'back-scratching', or 'log-rolling', for reasons unknown to me. It results in fulsome praise laid on with a trowel to cover a work which disinterested, or more scrupulous, reviewers would bury in concrete. By all means let us have fair criticism; as an author I welcome the review which points out errors, omissions and misprints, which I can then take into account when preparing a new edition. But I ignore the review based on a superficial glance at my book, which suggests that I should have written an entirely different one, or have refrained from writing anything. All too often an author is aware of his book's faults. He may have been limited by time and by subject coverage by his publisher, and if he has been limited to only sixteen pages for the index, when he expressly asked for twenty-four, he will not be kindly disposed towards the reviewer who particularly praises 'the extensive, comprehensive index'.

I would now like to outline some of the routine tasks of an editor. Having received some manuscripts, he reads them through at least twice. Resisting the urge to rewrite the entire script, he makes sure that the text is intelligible to readers, that it conveys useful information, and is not too repetitive. If he considers major changes to be desirable, he returns it to the author with his suggestions, but if he is hard up for material, once having obtained the typescript he hangs on to it like grim death. Having marked up the copy for the printer with headings, rules and size of type, he endeavours to ensure that the minimum of correction is required in the proof stage. When galley form is reached a copy is sent to the author, and copies are also despatched to members of the Editorial Board. This is to enable them to see what is going into the next issue, as they meet on rare occasions, permitting the editor to have a free hand. Only major changes of policy, or matters on which the editor requires advice, are submitted to the Board, but certain members return the proofs with corrections, obviously having read them. Meanwhile the editor anxiously awaits the return of the galleys. Some authors make drastic alterations, adding and deleting paragraphs, and occasionally attempting to re-write the entire article. This tendency must be curbed, although material bringing the article up to date, correcting errors, or clarifying obscure points should be permitted. Our President, Mr. G. V. Carey, always read the proofs with an eagle eye, marking his copy in three different colours. The red annotations indicated gross grammatical or other errors, and were not to be ignored. The blue ones Mr. Carey reserved for things with which he disagreed, but which were of less importance. The pencilled marks indicated items regarding which he had his doubts, but which should be considered. Mr. Carey made it clear that his opinions were only offered, but which should be considered. Mr. Carey made it clear that his opinions were only offered, but they were always appreciated and I was most grateful to him for his generous and always prompt assistance. When comparing several marked sets of the same proof I was always surprised that so few of the corrections corresponded. Added together they were invaluable, yet we all
sometimes missed a word wrongly spelled, or a letter omitted from the middle or end of a word.

The editor now has to make an issue of the journal out of yards of galleys—pasting up, as it is called. In fact, it is wise to pin them initially, as sometimes numerous alterations are necessary before the items are fitted together to fill the allotted space. When the editor was im-petuous, and made up the journal before receiving the proofs back, he found that authors had made additions and deletions which threw the entire thing out of gear. All the pages were carefully measured, making allowances for headings, rules and footnotes, and the galleys were then cut and attached to the pages of a previous issue of the journal. The main articles were commenced at the tops of pages, and any spaces left at the ends of articles were filled with shorter contributions. Correspondence, reviews and other usual features followed, all being carefully measured to fit the space allocated. An issue might have up to forty pages, in multiples of four. If the matter slightly overruns, a book review may be left for the next issue, but if it leaves something like two blank pages, the editor then has to sit down and write something to fill them. Assuming that everything now fits perfectly, the paste-up is sent back to the printer with corrections and instructions, with cover details altered, pagination inserted, and a list of contents added. The editor now sits back, his task completed—or is it! The page-proofs come back, and he ensures that corrections have been made and no new errors introduced. If he does let anybody else see the copy at this stage, he should ensure that it is only disinterested parties. Authors should not be let loose to add new paragraphs, and officers should not be encouraged to pen answers to corre-

pondents (‘this must go in the same issue’), or to insert notices of forthcoming events, be they births, marriages or deaths, or even just meetings! It is not only the difficulty involved in fitting these in, which can only be done by taking out something else, and possibly rearranging the matter. The printers have a schedule, to which they adhere as far as their customers permit them. If the editor returns copy on the dates promised, the printers fulfil their part of the bargain; but if they have to set new matter, transpose material in page form, and thus delay the actual printing, the customer should not be surprised if another order is put on the press before his. I cannot let this opportunity pass without paying tribute to the printers of The Indexer. They were always helpful, sometimes performed the seemingly impossible, and never let the editor down, despite his amateurish incursions into their domain.

These are but some of the duties of an editor. He will have conducted extensive correspondence attempting to procure advertisements, a difficult process for a very specialised periodical with a comparatively small circulation. He also initially stamped every envelope with the words ‘Printed Matter’ (until overprinted envelopes were procured), stuck labels (which he had typed) and stamps on every envelope, sorted them into various categories of weight and destination, and finally delivered them to the post office. Several hundred sample copies were also sent to libraries, and to enquirers through advertisements, in an attempt to build up the circulation. This proved a slow process, but results justified the effort, although they were not sensational. Later the process was streamlined, members of the family were persuaded to assist in the chores, and the issues of the journals were
usually sent out the day after receipt from the printers, in single copies, twos, sixes and tens, for individual members and subscribers, institutional members, corresponding members and officers of the Society, and contributors respectively. The editor could then sit back—and await the first letter or 'phone call (probably from our Chairman) announcing the discovery of a misprint! Such relaxation could not last long, however; the cupboard was bare, and all too soon another issue must be prepared.

With the fourth issue, completing a volume of *The Indexer*, it was necessary to include an index. As a librarian I like to find the title-page and index in the part completing the volume, and not have to wait weeks, or even months, before the volume can be sent to the binder. In our case it would entail waiting six months, but it has always been included in the centre of the final part. It is more economical to have it printed as part of the journal, and its location was always noted at the bottom of the contents page. Nevertheless, a number of subscribers have written asking for title-pages and indexes for binding purposes; obviously they had not read the final issue! The problems attached to compiling the index to the first volume of *The Indexer* will be obvious. Hundreds of eyes would be scrutinising it for adequacy, method of compilation, and for errors. The editor compiled the indexes to the first two volumes, without invoking adverse criticism. They are brief, but I hope adequate, and were designed to cover three pages, the fourth being reserved for the title-page. I did not include the names of persons mentioned in the features Society information and progress, but concentrated on the main articles and shorter notes, on correspondence and book reviews. I also included a number of entries under terms such as ‘Indexes’, ‘Indexing’, etc. Thus, articles on chain indexing, cumulative indexing, and music indexing appear under ‘Indexing’ as well as under ‘Chain . . .’, ‘Cumulative . . .’, and ‘Music . . .’. When volume three was nearing completion I asked Mr. Carey if he would compile the index, and he kindly agreed, helpful as always. Promptly it arrived, and was perused with keen interest. Mr. Carey had explained in a letter that he purposely avoided making many entries under ‘Index’, ‘Indexer’, and ‘Indexing’, since they are the underlying topic throughout the volume. Similarly he dispersed the entries under ‘Society of Indexers’ by placing them under ‘Council’, ‘Members’, ‘Officers’, etc. His index is fuller than mine, and although I might query certain features, I have no hesitation in pronouncing it better.

It would be very interesting to have a dozen people compile indexes to a volume of *The Indexer*, and to compare the results. They would probably be very different, and the biggest would not necessarily be the best. In fact, if time permitted, we could hold a competition, awarding a prize to the best, and printing it; but who would dare pronounce which was best?

I would not for one moment leave you with the impression that I did not enjoy my service as editor of *The Indexer*. It involved a great deal of my spare time; at times it was frustrating, and occasionally I despaired of producing anything larger than a broadsheet at the scheduled time. Fortunately, the officers of the Society gave me a free hand, assisted me with their contributions, and when I eventually suggested that I had to resign, they insisted that I must first find a worthy successor. This I managed to effect, and I can now read successive issues without having to face the gestation period and the
birth pangs! A change of editor brings a fresh outlook, new ideas, a different presentation, a change of dress, and a wider field of potential contributors. This transfusion of fresh blood is invigorating, and will ensure that the journal does not stagnate or become stereotyped. Having attracted subscribers, we must keep them, and widen our horizons to cater for an even larger circle of readers. There are branches of indexing that we have not yet touched upon, and there are developments in progress that cannot be ignored. Articles in our journal are abstracted in Library Science Abstracts, which is consulted by librarians throughout the world. The Indexer itself goes to China, Japan, Australia, Russia, India, Africa, America—in fact to most countries of the world. Our potential readership is every person in the world interested in indexing, so that we still have a long way to go!

Glancing through the issues that I edited from 1959 to 1963 I find something outstanding in almost every one. Sometimes it is tucked away at the end, like that little gem ‘On the rocks’, by J.C.T. (Vol. 1, p. 116), which describes the acquisition of pieces of rock as essential tools for indexers—and makes out a good case! There is the quotation from Special Libraries (Dec., 1958) at the top of one of my editorials: ‘Any fool can write, but it takes a genius to index’. I believe there could be many variations on this theme; quite a number of indexes look as if they have been compiled by absolute imbeciles. P. R. P. Claridge addressed the Society on ‘Mechanized indexing of information on chemical compounds in plants’, later printed in The Indexer (Vol. 2, pp. 4-19) giving a fascinating account of a mechanized information system. The data processing flow chart there featured gave the editor, and the printer, much trouble.

E. E. G. L. Searight provided an interesting description of his experiences in compiling the cumulative indexes to Keesing’s Contemporary Archives (Vol. 2, pp. 80-84) a monumental task admirably planned and solved. G. V. Carey read a paper entitled ‘No room at the top’ (Vol. 2, pp. 120-123) dealing with the overloading of indexes, which should be read by every indexer. Then there was the most ambitious article we printed, based on a paper read by William S. Heckscher. This was ‘The Index of Christian Art’, contributed in conjunction with Anna S. Esmeijer (Vol. 3, pp. 97-119). The plates alone are worth the annual subscription, and illuminate the text, which repays very careful reading, and elucidates the skilful indexing of unusual material. These are but a few examples of the material which passed through my hands, and which led to an interesting correspondence with the authors. Many controversial matters were aired, the pros and cons being printed, without the editor disclosing his views. We had correspondence on ‘one index, or more than one’, and on methods of alphabetisation. I wonder if any indexer changed his or her mind as the result of valiant efforts on the part of the protagonists? The editor did not; but he enjoyed printing the views of those valiantly supporting their pet theories, particularly when they appreciated that there was something to be said for alternative methods.

An editor is not a magician. He must rely upon contributions before he can begin his main function. He should not have to spend so much time soliciting material, but should be able to select and reject, to suggest improvements, to stimulate discussion, and to maintain a high standard. This bars printing everything sent to him, padding the pages with
ephemera from his own pen, and scraping the adjetival barrel for anything alphabetical that might be twisted into something remotely connected with indexing. The Indexer is only as good as the material it contains, and since it is your journal, why not contribute your articles, your views, your letters, clippings and gleanings, and enable the editor, if necessary, to cut, polish and set them as gems in the mirror of the Society throughout the world?

**ARCHIVE INDEXING**

L. C. Johnson

‘What is all this fuss about a simple thing like indexing?’ This querulous remark by the uninitiated, so often heard, sets the challenge of justification and explanation to all who care for the ready availability of sources of knowledge, a facility specially vital to those who pursue the important task of making history speak for to-day. It must immediately be said that in the case of archives, important and fascinating though they be from the viewpoint of antiquarianism, the archivist, from experience and insight into values, seeks to make his archives fulfil a functional rôle in addition. Browning, in ‘A death in the desert’, uses a striking figure of a ‘stick once fire from end to end, now ashes save the tip that holds a spark’—blown upon, the spark runs back, spreads itself and illumines the ashes into the original form of the stick. So does the live historian blow upon the records of past endeavours until the whole takes fire once more, illuminating the shape of massive undertakings and revealing the calibre of virile courageous men who took hold upon events and circumstances and moulded them into revolutionary enterprises. Indeed ‘there were giants in the earth in those days’, and we do well in these days to get the true measure of their stature.

Old books, papers, documents—of what use can they be in this thrusting, swiftly moving age when knowledge, we are told, is doubling itself every fifteen years? But knowledge has a habit of making cyclic re-eruptions, and so often what seems to have passed into limbo takes fire and sets a new trail ablaze with live ideas. The modern active man, under the stress of high pressure activities, will sometimes, nay often, be rewarded by a pause and a backward look. But, endeavouring to keep astride of swift developments, how can he stay to unravel the story of the past? The historian can come to his aid with a compact résumé of past events and earlier notions which can still be inspirationally effective and serve a modern need astonishingly well.

But how may the historian, the researcher, find his way through the labyrinth of papers which may often obscure his path by their very multiplicity and complexity, or grievously tempt him to stray from his appointed purpose through the insidious but attractive serpent of serendipity? How blessed then is the guide of sound indexes which may proffer its services. But good indexes do not fall together casually or by chance; they are the work of assiduous meticulous persons who know well that true indexing is no

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The substance of a lecture given in the Society’s Fourth Training Course.