I see that I am billed as talking to you this afternoon on the 'History of the Society'. But, as such a title seems somewhat presumptuous in the case of a body that is only exactly twelve years old, I prefer to call it 'The Story of the Society of Indexers'. In any case, if I may misquote Montesquieu:† 'Happy is the society that hath no history'. Even so, time will permit my dealing with only certain aspects of the story (and those quite briefly), and I trust that I may be forgiven if I use again one or two passages that have already appeared in print.

How the Society started

In 1956, when I retired from the Civil Service, I had been a free-lance indexer—on and off—for some thirty years, although I can assure you that I feel pretty ashamed when I look again at my earliest untutored efforts. It then occurred to me that some such association as ours was needed, but how to set about starting it?

The indexing of books and periodicals has been aptly described by Robert Collison as 'a cottage industry' and it is a fact that at that time I did not know the name of a single other person who worked in this field. Consequently it became necessary to sound the views of other indexers by means of letters in the press. Now I feel that I have scores of indexer friends and I count it as not the least of the achievements of the Society to have removed that intense feeling of solitude in which the free-lance indexer used to work.

The response to my appeals in the press was most gratifying. Letters came pouring in, and several discreet luncheons at my club enabled me to find out which of my more distinguished correspondents would be willing to accept office in the projected society. Those luncheon guests, I seem to remember, included our first President, Mr. Gordon Carey; our first Chairman, Mr. A. R. Hewitt, now a Vice-President; our second Chairman and late President, Mr. James Thornton, whose premature passing we all so deeply deplore; our first Hon. Treasurer, Mr. Robert Collison; our present Chairman, Mr. Richard Bancroft; our present Vice-Chairman, Mr. John Thornton, who has throughout been indefatigable as a Council member and for five years most ably edited the Society's journal.

Their advice and suggestions proved most helpful. In the result we were able to call an inaugural meeting of those people who had expressed interest at the end of March, 1967, when some sixty enthusiasts from all parts of the country (as well as one who had expressly flown all the way from Utrecht) assembled in the rooms of the National Book League. (Will all those who were present at that meeting of Founders twelve years ago very kindly stand up and be counted?—Thank you, there are seven of the original Founders here today.) The Dutch enthusiast was Professor Heckscher, who in 1962 was to give the Society perhaps the finest of all its discussion meeting talks, his description of 'The Index of Christian Art'. Beautifully illustrated, this can still be obtained in separate pamphlet form.

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*Being the substance of a talk given after the A.G.M. on May 28.
† Or it may have been Thomas Carlyle—the Dictionaries of Quotations seem undecided as to the exact original source of the saying: 'Happy is the country that hath no history'.
At that inaugural meeting the first Officers and Council members were elected and the question of the annual subscription was discussed but the actual amount was most trustingly, I think, left to be decided by the Council. By them it was fixed at two guineas, which surprisingly enough is still the rate today. A very cheap two guineas' worth, you will agree; I can think of only one other (and very widely dissimilar) kind of convenience the price of which has remained constant all that time!

The Society and the Press

A very lively account of that first meeting appeared in the alas now defunct periodical Truth (shades of Labouchere!), while in May The Times devoted a whole leader to the subject of the Society's formation. This started by saying:

There are far too many societies. But plenty of people will readily supply a list of half a dozen that can be dispensed with in order to make room for the newly formed Society of Indexers. Here is a necessary body if ever there was one.

Peter Simple, the conversational columnist, was less sympathetic. In the same month he wrote in his 'Way of the World' column in the Daily Telegraph that a cautious dismay had stirred within him as he read of the formation of a Society of Indexers:

The initial objects [he went on] seem harmless enough; but this must surely be the first step in a campaign—a great march to power and eminence by the faceless, anonymous body of men and women whose work (or its omission) seems so often the only thing reviewers have time to notice.

In their march, they will trample authors even further into the depressed classes. No mere addition of their names to the cast-list on the title-page will content them; what they must be after is nothing less than a signed preface in which 'the indexers would like to acknowledge the help of the author in providing the actual text'.

And what, for that matter, about newspapers? Take a look at the foot of page 1 . . .

Well, I didn't much relish being called 'faceless'. But I did take a look at the foot of page 1, as directed. And what did I behold? The most pitifully puny collection of about half a dozen entries that has ever been miscalled an index.

The Liverpool Daily Post, on the other hand, counterbalanced Peter Simple's blast with a most favourable article, in which it was pointed out that the Society was not only the first organization of its kind in the United Kingdom, but also the only one in the world. The latter part, of course, is now no longer true, since quite recently there was called into existence a new American Society of Indexers 'to redress the balance of the old', as The Indexer's editorial described it.

Other organs have from time to time made stray allusions to the Society. And then in 1963 Mr. Punch entered the fray. As you know, Punch runs a weekly literary competition, called the Toby competition. In No. 12 of the series competitors were invited to invent a demarcation dispute in the professions. The winning entrant chose the indexing profession and this is his fictitious dispute:

The Chairman of the Society of Indexers said yesterday that Dictionaries, Telephone Directories, etc., were, in fact, indexes, and should not be compiled by non-members of the Society. 'Let lexicographers and the Post Office join our Society. Not that they're qualified to join', he said.

So much for demarcation. Whilst on the subject of the Press, I expect that many members have read Alan Brien's longish article in the Sunday Times of February 25 this year. Mr. Brien had already in Punch in 1965 declared that if he were in a position to introduce a Private Member's Bill in the House of Commons, it would be to deny copyright to any work of non-fiction published without an index, as had once been
proposed by the 19th century Lord Campbell. The Sunday Times article bears the delightful title: 'Indexes—pleasures of; pitfalls in; regrettable absences of; penalty for failing to provide'. Apart from two unfortunate errors, naming our respected Hon. Secretary as Miss Helen Wheatley and attributing the awarding of the Wheatley medal to the Society of Indexers instead of to the Library Association, Mr. Brien has made a useful contribution to the literature of indexing. He tells one or two indexing anecdotes that I had not encountered before, and I rather enjoyed this sly thrust at some publishing houses: 'I suspect the continued production of index-less books is simply due to a mixture of parsimony and slovenliness.'

The Constitution and Rules

I am afraid that we must now revert briefly to the early days of the Society. About three weeks after the inaugural meeting, already described, a Special General Meeting was held, at which the Constitution and Rules were adopted. For their compilation the Society was indebted to Mr. A. R. Hewitt; they were designed to last and have certainly stood the test, for only three (or possibly four) minor amendments have had to be made since. As members will have noticed from the up-to-date version printed in the Spring Indexer, the latest amendment concerns the change-over from the old panel system to the new status of Registered Indexers.

Discussion Meetings

After this same Special Meeting was given our first talk—a paper read by Mr. C. W. Cleverdon, Librarian to the School of Aeronautics, on 'Co-ordinate Indexing'. With the very lively discussions and the sharing of experience that follow them, these talks have proved one of the Society's most useful and productive activities. For some years as many as six such meetings were held annually, but it has been found that since 1964, when they were restricted to three per year plus one (like this) after the A.G.M., attendances have improved.

We have been lucky in finding well over 40 experts in their respective fields to speak to us and they have spoken on almost every conceivable aspect of indexing. Some have come from within the membership and many from outside. But as their talks have with very few exceptions been faithfully reported in The Indexer, I shall limit myself here to briefly mentioning five of them.

An early talk was given by Mr. Philip Unwin, the publisher. Disappointingly, he expressed the view that there were many general books for which an index was superfluous and a mere waste of money. He thus laid himself open to Alan Brien's charge of parsimony that I have mentioned earlier. But the paper read by our President Emeritus, Mr. Gordon Carey, which he called 'No Room at the Top', must have caused all our biographical indexers to do some pondering and many of them to mend their ways. An unusual departure from the run-of-the-mill came with a fascinating illustrated talk on 'Fingerprint Indexing' by Detective Chief Superintendent J. M. Godsell, Officer-in-Charge of Scotland Yard's Fingerprint Branch. Then there have been two talks given by Wheatley Medal winners, on which I must say a few words.

The Wheatley Medal

As most of my hearers are aware, this award was instituted at the end of 1961 by (pace Alan Brien) the Library Association, for whose enthusiasm and generosity in the matter the literary world should be deeply grateful. The medal was meant to be given annually to the compiler of an outstanding index during the preceding year. But the first two years of its existence drew blanks, either owing to a dearth of nominations or because no entry was judged to be of sufficiently high standard.

Then in 1964 came the first award, the medal going to Mr. Michael Maclagan, a Fellow and Senior Tutor of Trinity College, Oxford, for his fine index to his Clemency Canning, a life of his own great-great-great uncle, the 1st Earl
Canning, the first Viceroy of India. Most kindly Mr. Maclagan agreed to read a paper on this index to a meeting of the Society, and those who were privileged to hear it all declared that it was a wonderfully interesting talk. It could not have been more unfortunate that owing to exceptionally raw weather (and possibly other causes) the total audience numbered seven (including the speaker and his wife)! I was in hospital just recovering from an operation at the time, but directly I heard of that abysmal attendance I felt compelled to write on behalf of the Society a letter of profound apology to Mr. Maclagan. The talk was never reported in The Indexer—no doubt, after that let-down the editor did not dare to ask for the manuscript! After all, there can be no greater discourtesy to a speaker who has taken considerable time and trouble to prepare a paper that has been requested by the Society, and that has travelled some distance in order to deliver it, than to provide such a miserably meagre audience, quite unworthy of his effort.

I do implore my hearers to bear this in mind when debating whether to turn up or stay away from a meeting.

The other Wheatley Medal winner who has given us the benefit of her experience—and her talk was well-attended, I am glad to say—was Mrs. Alison Quinn, who in 1966 received the award for her magnificent index to the facsimile edition of Richard Hakluyt’s Principal Navigations. Her talk, which was full of interest and widely appreciated, was fully recorded in Volume 5 of The Indexer, and that leads me to attempt an account of that journal, which may be regarded as the pivot of our organization.

The Indexer

The first number of this half-yearly publication, of which we have all grown to be so proud, appeared in March 1958, ten months after the Society’s formation. It possessed but 28 pages—and some succeeding numbers had even fewer—but it did contain three rather notable features. The first was an inspiring ‘Message’ from the then Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Harold Macmillan, who, writing as he said as one who not only provided material for the index to Hansard but also often had reason to be grateful for an indexer’s skill and patience, recounted several most amusing examples of eccentric index entries, and ended by wishing the Society and its members all prosperity and success in their undertakings. This and the succeeding article, the highly laudatory leader from The Times to which I have already alluded, were reproduced in facsimile.

The third notable feature was entitled ‘No Index—No Comment’ and consisted of a list of books published during the preceding six months which should have been provided with indexes but in fact had none. Each item in the list started with the name of the publisher, followed by that of the author and the title of the book. The column lasted for exactly two numbers of The Indexer. Then, regrettably, it was found that one of the blacklisted books had actually had an index after all, and apologies had to be tendered. (We escaped an action for defamation.) Also another publishing house, a powerful one, took exception to being pilloried in this fashion, with the result that the Council—somewhat timidly, I have always thought—recommended that ‘No Index—No Comment’ be no more.* Now, this feature had always been the apple of the first editor’s eye and he had succeeded in digging out 86 unindexed titles for the first number and just over 100 for the second. It may, therefore, have possibly been pique at its discontinuance that caused him to resign after producing the third number. The editor in question was Harold Smith, F.L.A., then a librarian at the Surrey County Library, and the Society will always be grateful to him for laying the journal’s foundations so firmly and so successfully.

* The same end has to be attained today (but with far fewer victims for the pillory) by reproducing extracts from reviews in which some book is castigated for the lack of an index or its inadequacy.
He was succeeded in 1959 by Mr. John Thornton, the Librarian of the Medical College at Bart's Hospital. He remained as editor for 5 years, took enormous trouble in securing first-class contributors, and under him The Indexer really began to prosper and make its mark, both at home and overseas. If you seek to know his trials and tribulations, you should read his striking account of his editorship in Vol. 4 of The Indexer.

The third and present editor is yet another Librarian. Really the Society owes a great debt of gratitude for the enthusiasm of its Librarian members. Mr. L. M. Harrod is, as you know, at present in the United States. His deputy, Mrs. Elizabeth Wallis, when first approached, was a little diffident, as she had never previously undertaken any similar task. How far she has succeeded I leave you to judge from the Spring number. To my way of thinking, she has produced, with a little help in the paste-up from Mr. Thornton, one of the finest issues of The Indexer to have appeared so far.

When, some years ago, I somewhat proudly showed a bound Vol. 1 of The Indexer to a literary friend, he said, 'Yes, this is all very well, but you'll never be able to keep it up; you'll find that by the end of another year you have completely exhausted all the possible aspects of indexing'.

Events have flatly falsified that prediction, because, like chess, the variations of indexing seem inexhaustible. Since then, The Indexer has contained a multitude of articles, weighty or gay, on such varied topics as: archive indexing; chain indexing; children's books' indexes; citation indexing; computer-produced indexes; cumulative indexing; the design of indexes; documentary indexing; encyclopaedic indexes; foreign surnames; the future of indexing; humorous indexes; legal indexing; masterpieces of indexing; medical indexing; one index or more than one; scientific and technical indexing; telephone directories; the typography of indexes. And this list is nothing like complete.

Under the very able editorship of Mr. Harrod our journal now has normally 48 pages, while one bumper number stretched to 56. You seldom find a mistake or a literal in its pages and that is because the proofs pass through the hands of that dean and prince of proof-readers, Mr. Gordon Carey.

If the suggested sharing of the journal with the new American Society takes effect, as I sincerely hope it will, then we can surely expect larger issues and possibly its even becoming a quarterly.

I seem to have been talking a lot about The Indexer. But after all it is about the most important of the Society's flowerings, or at any rate the most widely known outside our own circle.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

I have had no time to speak of the excellent liaison the Society has established with such bodies as the Publishers' Association, the Library Association, which has throughout been represented on our Council by our present Vice-Chairman, and Aslib, in whose magnificent quarters we are privileged to gather this evening, and whose representative, Mr. Jack Bird, we are delighted to see among us. We have also had on occasions useful contact with the Society of Authors.

There are two other activities I feel I must briefly mention. One is the Society's Training Courses, which are sought after and provide a very useful function. The first of these, which was confined to our members, was held at the School of Librarianship of University College, London, in 1958; since 1961 they have been held at the North Western Polytechnic, annually except for this year, when in the absence of Mr. Harrod, who has recently been responsible for running them, it was impossible to arrange one. They are open to all on payment of a very modest fee and there is no dearth of applicants. A recent course caught the fancy of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, who have since published it in an amplified form under the title of Training.
in Indexing. Regrettably, for the English edition the price was fixed preposterously at 75s. The publishers have promised, however, that a cheaper paperback edition will shortly be forthcoming. Nonetheless the English edition has meanwhile sold about 350 copies, some of course to libraries but a number to individual purchasers.

The other activity is the Register of Indexers, which last year took the place of the old Panel system. Keeping this Register and providing suitable names out of it for inquiring publishers and authors provides a pretty full occupation for our good Hon. Secretary.

Before the advent of this Society, we indexers undoubtedly formed the Cinderella of the publishing world. You will agree that we are still by no means overpaid, but our lot has been considerably improved as the result of the Society’s report on remuneration published in 1959 and twice revised since, the second time considerably discussed today.

I trust I have not wearied you with these reminiscences of years gone by and that you will not consider them merely an old man's vapourings. That we have been copied by the formation of a similar body in America shows, I think, the necessity for such a Society as ours at the present time. And what of the Society’s future? I have ventured to coin a Latin motto, which I hope you will be able to re-echo. It is: VIVAT, FLOREAT SOCIETAS INDEXERORUM! —Long life and prosperity to the Society of Indexers!

*As Mr. Carey has pointed out, Indexeronun is probably dog-Latin. Can any classically-learned reader suggest what the correct form should be?—Indicenium? Indexifacientium?

IVOR, ISAAC, JOHN, ALFRED.

Finding his name in the index of the new Penguin 'History of Music', the accompanist Ivor Newton looked up the reference. 'Newton', it says, 'was responsible for the scientific achievements of the 18th century and had given men renewed confidence in the power of independent thought.'—The Daily Telegraph (February 26).

This book was clearly not indexed by its author and we trust that the above 'howler' (of independent thought?) was not perpetrated by a member of the Society of Indexers.

It is surprising that in addition to being credited with the discovery of the law of gravity (Isaac, 1642-1727) poor Ivor did not find that he was also the author of 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds' (the Rev. John, 1725-1807) and of the Dictionary of Birds (Alfred, 1829-1907).

G.N.K.

CHAPTER-HEADINGS IN HEAD-LINES ON VERSO PAGES

Arising out of the recent article and correspondence on the place of printed pagination, may one (belatedly) raise a somewhat analogous question: the choice of the chapter or section heading (indicating the text heading at that point, e.g. of an encyclopaedia) on a verso page. The time-honoured custom seems to be to give there the first heading on the same verso page (as e.g. in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 1944); but that heading is obviously visible and hardly needs stating, except with greater prominence. What does need stating is the heading that is not seen on that page, viz. the last heading on the preceding page, to text continued (unidentified) on the verso. This (thankfully) is done, e.g. in Dr. N. Pevsner's Buildings in England series. Book-producers and designers, please note!

H. V. MOLESWORTH-ROBERTS.