MOANS OF AN INDEXER
G. NORMAN KNIGHT

My latest indexing enterprise has produced three distinct occasions for moaning. I should welcome the views of other members on these subjects—and I trust that the Editor will too.

I was commissioned by one of London’s best known publishing houses to index the life of a late very well-known public figure written by an equally well-known biographer, who happens to be a peer of the realm. The text totalled nearly 400 pages.

When I was almost half-way through my task I was rung up by the publisher’s editor and told that my index must on no account exceed 16 pages. This was only the second occasion in my life, so far as I can remember, that I have ever had a limit imposed on the length of one of my indexes, and I protested strongly. I pointed out that the work contained more indexable proper names than I could recall ever having seen in a comparable sized biography. The editor agreed that there were a remarkable number of proper names but said that the production department had ordered only sufficient paper for a sixteen-page index.

Continuing to protest that with such a limit my index might fail to do justice to the excellence of the text, eventually I was reluctantly allowed a total of 20 pages. Now my difficulties began. I always find it very hard to estimate exactly the number of columns that will be occupied by the entries on my cards (many of them containing numerous subheadings), especially when ignorant of the size of type that will be used. The mere imposition of a limit cramped my style and I found myself economizing in words at every step. The result was that the second half of the book was not indexed as fully (or satisfactorily) as the first half. Owing to my extensive pruning the index in the end worked out at 17½ pages. Although both author and publisher were good enough to praise my effort, I myself was far from satisfied, for I knew that, had it not been circumscribed, I could have produced a more complete index and still not exceeded 20 pages.*

I certainly feel that any experienced indexer knows better than either author or publisher’s editor the length required for a given index and he should be allowed to determine it accordingly. Should he produce a result out of all proportion, then he can be rapped on the knuckles and his cards returned to him for cutting to a reasonable length.

Galleys or Paged Proofs?

My second moan is to some extent related to the first. I was horrified to discover that I would be sent in the first instance paged galley proofs of the index instead of ordinary galleys. This seems to be a growing practice among publishers today and is, I imagine, intended to save time and/or money. But changed methods do not always mean improved methods. The result for the proof-corrector is particularly unfortunate—in the present instance the author complained bitterly about not receiving any proper galley proofs of his text—because on page proofs it is not possible to make any amendment that will add or omit a single line without making full compensation in the same page (or column). In my case, if I had known

* I got my own back to a tiny extent by making my preliminary note read: ‘Owing to limitations of space it has not been possible to include in this index every one of the vast number of proper names referred to in the text’.
that my proofs would be coming first in the form of galleys, I should have felt I could confidently go ahead, aware that if there were to be a few lines too many, this could easily be remedied by appropriate deletions.

Complimentary Copies

My third moan concerns the presentation of a copy of the book to the maker of a substantial index (i.e. say over eight pages) in it. The index is a vital part of any work of non-fiction and consequently it seems to me that the indexer should rank in importance at least as high as an illustrator or translator, both of whom presumably would automatically receive a free copy of any book with which they were associated.

In the present instance, as I had been very friendly with the subject of the biography both at Oxford and in later life, I was particularly anxious to secure a copy of his official life. But when I applied to the publishers I was told that it was not part of the firm's policy to supply a [mere] indexer with a complimentary copy of any work he had indexed. Of course, either I could have accepted this refusal and bought my own copy on publication—possibly the publishers would so far have relaxed their principles as to allow me one at trade prices—or no doubt the author (with whom I had maintained excellent relations throughout) would have generously given me one out of his own precious store of free copies.

On principle, however, I persevered, pointing out to the publishers that on no previous occasion had I been refused a similar request and that this applied even to such expensive works as a five-volume encyclopaedia. I am pleased to record that my pertinacity proved successful and I was promised the complimentary copy on publication.

Finally, it is observed that in the above article the personal pronoun, first person singular, has been used no fewer than 26 times. While the more cumbrous 'the present writer' might not be on all those occasions an adequate substitute, I (here is another) do feel that a profound apology is due to any reader who has continued to read so far for what must appear to be my excessive egotism.

COMPUTER TECHNIQUE APPLICATION TO THE ARCHIVES PROFESSION

Automated indexing may help solve some of the retrieval problems of archivists and historical researchers.

A program entitled ‘Archives Finding Aids: An Indexing Project in Cooperation with the National Archives’ is being directed by Dr. Frank G. Burke, information specialist with the National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408.

A software package called SPINDEX II has been developed.

This system involves the taking of archival finding aids and indexing them and testing the program to determine whether they are applicable as finding aids.

Hopefully the indexes prepared will be used in place of the card catalog or other finding aids and possibly for inter-depository data banks either national or regional in scope.

This project is considered to be the first step in the application of computer techniques to the archival profession.

Heretofore, a number of standard plain-text bibliographic indexing programmes have been available, but none have entirely suited the needs of the archival profession.

In 1966 experiments with WORD-AUTHOR INDEX (WADEX) programs and KEY-WORD in CONTEXT (KWIC) programs established their applicability to historical source materials. Through the use of these programs, box lists were generated, titles were sorted in information fields, and key-word indexes were prepared from the titles of file folders.