Butcher: I think most people who read a book rather take the index for granted, and don't know quite what it involves; could you very briefly define what is indexing, what is involved in it.

Hewitt: It's very difficult in a short time to describe an index, I suppose briefly one could say it's the guide to the book; unless you know what's in the book, the book is almost useless. So shall I say: it's a guide to the book.

Butcher: How long does it take roughly to try and index a book?

Hewitt: Well that of course depends on the length of the book. An experienced indexer can index roughly eight pages, six or eight pages an hour, so that a small book would take two or three days. I have worked on an encyclopaedia and know from experience it took, on and off, two to two and a half years.

Butcher: How does one become an indexer; it's not usually the kind of thing one is told about on leaving school, for example.

Hewitt: No. I think one becomes an indexer by accident, by inclination, or by interest in the subject, and of course some people do it from an economic point of view; the extra indexing fees are very helpful these days.

Butcher: It does sound like a very lonely job though, like that of a poet or an author. How do people overcome this?

Hewitt: Indeed. You must know something of the subject. You must have been brought up with it, have studied it or had occasion to use it. If I may give as an example—the law. You must have some association with the law, not necessarily as a member of the bar or a solicitor, but you must have some connection with law books. You are thus able to learn the subject, recognise the terms, and so on.

Butcher: Is the Society concerned only with publications in England or is there an international flavour to the Society as well?

Hewitt: There's an international flavour in that the journal I mentioned just now has an overseas subscription of seven hundred and, very recently, we are pleased to say, we encouraged and sponsored the formation of an American Society of Indexers which is in affiliation with the British Society.

Butcher: Can we talk about how the Society came into being in the first place?

Hewitt: Yes. It was the result of a letter to the press by Mr. Norman Knight, an enthusiastic and very able freelance indexer. He wrote to the press inviting other indexers to join him in forming a Society, as I said just now, to overcome the isolation of indexers, to encourage the preparation and the publication of good indexes. I think today it has had some effect because there are many enlightened publishers who find a good index essential for a good book.

Butcher: How many people in this country are registered indexers?

Hewitt: The Society today is very small and, we like to think, select. We have just over three hundred members, but one of the services we provide is a Register of indexers. There are just over one hundred names on the register, arranged by subjects, so if anyone wants to find an indexer on any particular subject, in a particular field, we can provide names.

Butcher: It is very important then for the individual to be an expert in a special field.

Hewitt: Indeed. You must know something of the subject. You must have been brought up with it, have studied it or had occasion to use it. If I may give as an example—the law. You must have some association with the law, not necessarily as a member of the bar or a solicitor, but you must have some connection with law books. You are thus able to learn the subject, recognise the terms, and so on.

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* The text of an interview with Mr. A. R. Hewitt in the 'Outlook' feature of the BBC World Services. The interviewer was Gill Butcher.