INDEXING TECHNIQUES AND STANDARDS:
THE DEVELOPING ROLE OF THE
REGISTRAR OF INDEXERS

Elizabeth J. Wallis
Registrar of the Society of Indexers

Mrs Wallis began by comparing the drama of Mr Turnbull’s address to the dramatic impact of Edinburgh itself, and commented on his dilemma in wanting to publish fine books but resenting the economic rat race that threatened his standards. She wondered if some book could be published with and without an index, to let the market show public demand. She believed there was an upturn, as enquiries for indexers had risen by 20%, with requests increasing particularly from continental publishers who, with a falling pound, were looking for people who could do a good job on time. There was no doubt that quality indexes were required; producing a bad index was dangerous to standards and she had wondered if she could ever take one to the Office of Fair Trading on the grounds that a book with a bad index was an inadequate tool.

As Registrar, Mrs Wallis had links with both indexers and publishers, and she remarked on the pattern of publishing and the Wheatley Medal awards over the last fifteen years; in five years no award was made, Cambridge University Press had published three out of eleven awarded medals, and the Athlone Press two. Such a pattern was surely not accidental. She had looked almost in vain for Scottish material on Smith’s railway bookstall, and asked about the financing and circulation of the Scots magazine. (Her audience assured her that it was popular and widely read.)

Mrs Wallis then told of enquiries she had received from an American publisher who, pleased with some work done in Inverness, had called her from Virginia with work possibilities, and after discussion it was arranged that Mr Dixon should organize those interested and reply. Mr Goudie told of an enquiry from the Netherlands, to add to Mrs Wallis’ list of Swedish and Canadian publishers with queries about periodical runs, definitive histories and books on as varied subjects as the Afrika Corps and the Queen Mother.

Mrs Wallis then dealt with a variety of problems, discussing the case of an indexer who, unable to get in touch with the publisher, did a more thorough job than was required. She also mentioned the matter of copyright, which should be covered in the contract. Mr Gordon said that such problems were being discussed with the Publishers Association. A draft leaflet on a Guide to Publishers was circulated and Mr Bakewell commented that much remained to be done about public relations. Referring back to Mr Turnbull’s address, Mr Vyner maintained that run-on headings were not necessarily an economy in composition. Mrs Wallis said that she sent in typewritten cards, and pointed out that, when an indexer was quick, clever, accurate and delivered on time, one could see from Mr Haig-Brown’s paper what could be done.

Turning to fees, Mrs Wallis thought that the present form of assessment was often unfair to publishers, and would suggest possible grading of indexes and indexers for suitable texts, at popular, intermediate, in-depth and possibly graduate levels. She would like to see a minimum rate per thousand words payment system, such as that used by the Institute of Linguists. This would help publishers to know what they were buying and offer some estimate of the indexer’s speed. Starting the Panel and the present Register had on the whole been effective in reducing the ‘cottage industry’ image, but now a new system was being discussed in which the Board of Assessors, in considering new aspirants to the Register, would consider the prospective indexer’s calibre rather than just two indexes. Mrs Wallis then distributed copies of Hazel Bell’s outline plan on guidance for assessment of indexes.

Mr Dixon said that indexing really was a cottage industry, and with neither a union nor power of exclusion to protect individual rates he would still prefer to see a charge by the hour, modified by size and difficulty, and the contract with the publisher made for less than a stated maximum. Mr Gordon said that the NUJ was expanding into book-publishing work, with agreements with fifteen to twenty publishing houses at rates varying from £2.85 to £1.80 an hour. The survey in progress showed that rates varied considerably. Mrs Wallis repeated her opinion and Mr Dixon spoke of a difference of measuring input and output and the problem of contracting for a product without guidelines. Mr Berrill supported Mrs Wallis; as a publisher he calculated in terms of numbers of words, and such a measure of an index would be tidy; possibly a number of entries of a particular category of work could be used to...
establish a pattern of organization. Discussing rates, Mrs Dainty mentioned a rate of £3 for ten pages of text, and the problem of queries arising after work was done.

Open Forum: Open discussion had run concurrently with Mrs Wallis’ address and continued during teatime, but the Forum proper began when Mr Gordon, speaking of the new, revised system of assessment, said that observations on its draft would be received in May. Mr Vyner mentioned an inadequate index, and Mrs Wallis said that such matters should be pointed out to publishers. She also quoted some inadequacies in children’s reference books, but Mr Dixon said that these had shown some improvement. Mr Bradley referred to HM Stationery Office publications, and Mrs Wallis looked for improvement under a new Controller; the Official Publications were in fact using contractors for indexing.

Mrs McCarthy wondered if it was necessary to belong to the Register rather than just getting on with indexing, and Mrs Wallis emphasised the value of the Register in raising standards of work and the prestige of the Society. Mr Gordon said that he had had over 700 enquiries about membership, but serious enquirers asked about joining the Register. The important thing was to find some measure of the competence of indexers; an award of the Wheatley Medal indicated a fairly good indexer, but the balance had to be struck at 51%. Mrs Green asked about the difference between membership of the Society and the Register, and Mr Gordon said proposals had been made to have a distinctive title, perhaps Fellow. Mr Vyner suggested ‘Associate’ for present members not on the Register, but Mrs Wallis pointed out that ‘Associate’ was often a considerable qualification. She also agreed with Mr Goudie that continuous assessment should be carried out.

There was in general inadequate briefing, editors didn’t know what indexers needed to know, and indexers were isolated. Mrs McCarthy felt communication was the problem, but though Mrs Wallis thought the numbers of publishers moving out of London would reduce this, several members had greater doubts about the efficiency of the postal services. Mr Vyner mentioned a mistake in the index of BS 3700 as an example of the difficulty of checking the proofs of one’s own index. This was endorsed by Mr Gordon, who emphasized the value of mutual criticism and revision. Mr Gordon and Mrs Wallis discussed the value of BS 3700 as a basis for general conformity within the Society and the need for self-discipline by indexers in overcoming obstacles of time, money, and domestic problems. Mrs McCarthy mentioned physical capacity as a factor, and Mrs Dainty estimated that she had read one difficult text three times, certainly more often than the editor. Decline in printers’ standards was discussed by Mrs Wallis.

BOOK REVIEWS


This survey of compulsory cataloguing courses in accredited library schools in North America, based on a questionnaire circulated in 1973, finds adherence to a very narrow, traditional syllabus, lack of interaction between syllabus and what is going on in libraries and of consultation with working librarians, and lack of opportunity for teachers to bring their own experience up to date through periods of work in libraries. Apart from the last—the deplorable lack of sabbatical leave, which is as necessary for a teacher of cataloguing as of any other subject—I suspect that the formality of the questionnaire itself had some influence on the conformity and rigidity of the replies.

There is not space here to write in detail of the survey’s findings, nor of the few ‘special’ schools picked out for comment because of their broader curriculum. Some of the lacunae in the syllabus which the survey points out are undoubtedly made good by other, though possibly not all compulsory, courses in the curriculum, as is shown by the survey of current courses on indexing in North American institutions contributed to the last issue of The Indexer (April 1977) by James D. Anderson, himself a teacher at one of the schools surveyed by Alan Thomas. Lack of formal consultation with other members of the library profession does not preclude the flow of reports, catalogues and brochures with which librarians are kind enough to keep school staff aware of what is going on, nor prevent the exchange of information when teachers meet informally with practising cataloguers, librarians who are not cataloguers, and old students, all of whom are ready to bring the teacher up to date and broaden his horizons.

There being less widespread interest in classification in North America than in this country (though the need for categorical, or ‘facet’, analysis in thesaurus construction is expanding interest), classification studies are frequently restricted to the two schemes which are North American standards. Alan Thomas, who is a teacher at the Ealing School of Librarianship, would prefer comparative study of a wider range of schemes, leading to a better grasp of fundamental theory, and hence to more imaginative practice. He makes suggestions for an ideal curriculum, both responsive to and leading the library field.

Mary Piggott