Do you get the credit you deserve?

Ann Edwards

Sir,—My recent publication on Pope is the first of my books to have had the services of a professional indexer. When I asked if I might include her name in the list of acknowledgements, she gratefully said yes, adding that members of her society were not often acknowledged. This surprised me, as I should have thought this a matter of common courtesy on the part of an author. That an indexer is exercising a paid profession has nothing to do with it: author, publisher, printer and other ancillaries in book production are all named and all paid. Why should a very hard-working, scholarly and skilled profession not be given its due?

James Reeves.

The above letter appeared in the Times literary supplement of 23rd July 1976 and you might think that not much has changed since. Indexers are still rarely acknowledged. The Guinness book of records stands out as a notable exception.

But, in general terms, does anyone really know what publishers think about it? Or why they don’t acknowledge indexers—when so many other professionals who work on a book, from translators to typists to jacket designers, so frequently are named?

I drafted a brief questionnaire and sent it to 17 publishing houses, most in London but a few provincial, ranging from the large and famous to the small and relatively obscure. Some I had worked for, some I had approached for work in the past (we’ll put your name on our file, but...) and some were complete strangers. I also, out of curiosity, requested an acknowledgement in a book I was working on at the time.

Of the 17 publishers to whom I wrote, 12 replied. This in itself seems to indicate a fairly large amount of goodwill towards the Society.

The first subject on the questionnaire was policy. Did they have an explicit house rule on whether or not to include an indexer’s name? None admitted to a fixed and rigid policy but four had definite ideas on what should be done and, therefore, was done in their own house.

Routledge & Kegan Paul and another publisher, who wished to remain anonymous, thought that there was no need for acknowledgement, because indexers, like editors, proof-readers and compositors, are only doing their job—and to name one would invite claims from the others. The anonymous editorial director would permit an author to include an indexer in his own acknowledgements (although on the basis of the previous argument he does not allow himself to be mentioned).

Ernest Benn, on the other hand, always asks the author to make 'a full acknowledgement in his preface', where an outside indexer has been used. And the estimable and energetic Norris McWhirter believes that 'a good indexer is a vital part of any reference book and requires skills and other qualities which ought to be acknowledged'. Consequently he has for some years acknowledged the indexer of the Guinness book of records, even though the authors were not always named.

My second question was whether, where there was no definite policy, an indexer would be named if he asked to be. I received an unconditional 'yes' from: Cambridge University Press; Chatto & Windus; Constable & Co; Heinemann; Ward Lock Educational.

Batsford Books told me that the author would normally include the indexer in his acknowledgements, but did not say whether he would be asked to do so if he did not of his own accord. David and Charles would include the indexer’s name if asked, where the work had been particularly complex or on an esoteric subject. Hamish Hamilton would do so if they and the author agreed that the indexer had done a specially good job.

It is worth noting, however, that many publishers added that they would normally expect (or at least prefer) the author to prepare his own index, although I had not asked for this information. Clearly more missionary work is needed.

Finally I asked them where they would put the acknowledgement, suggesting several possibilities. None of them was prepared to name the indexer on the title page. Some had already specified that it should be among the author’s
acknowledgements, and the remainder settled for the head or foot of the index, with a slight numerical bias towards the head.

Routledge, although they do not feel it necessary to acknowledge indexers, sent a very full and careful reply and suggested that if such acknowledgements were general practice, a page of the prelims might well be used for all the names that would have to be included.

In addition to replies to the questionnaire, I also received useful information from a Registered Indexer who has written to The Indexer in the past on this subject.

Brenda Hall tells me that she has never been refused an acknowledgement when she has asked for it, and among those who have agreed are: Edward Arnold; George Bell; Longman; Penguin & Pelican; Marshall Cavendish; Mitchell Beazley; Geoffrey Chapman; Butterworth; Evans Brothers; Barrie & Jenkins; Hutchinson; and Heinemann.

As for my own request for an acknowledgement, Longman, who appear in Mrs Hall's list, declined saying 'unfortunately we do not have signed indexes'. It may be, of course, that the African and Caribbean division, for which I was working, has a different policy from other departments, or it may be that overall policy has changed since Mrs Hall last worked for them. Or it may be that she has been exceptionally fortunate.

What conclusions can be drawn from the replies I received? Firstly, since two-thirds of a more or less random selection took the time and trouble to reply, sometimes in great detail, it seems that publishers on the whole are kindly disposed towards us. I got the impression that many senior editors welcomed the opportunity to express their opinions, both on the questions and on publisher/indexer relations in general.

Secondly, it cannot be emphasized too much that only three publishers told me categorically that they would not be prepared to acknowledge an indexer, but many of them did say that they were hardly ever asked to do so.

Why do indexers not ask to be named? Possibly a recollection of the old notice: Please do not ask for Credit as a Refusal often offends. There is after all no reason to suppose that we suffer any less than the public at large from the fear of being rejected. No doubt some indexers feel, as some editors do, that since they are only doing their job they need no acknowledgement. On the other hand, if one is anonymous, one's faults like one's virtues are 'non-attributable', off the record, so to speak. It may be that some indexers prefer it that way—just as in some parts of the world tribesmen keep their real names secret lest they give their enemies the opportunity to work spells against them—or indexers may just be very self-effacing people!

It seems to me finally that, quite apart from wishing for recognition for outstanding individual work and for the very existence of indexers as separate beings, we ought to request the publication of indexers' names as a normal practice, because this could only improve the standard of published indexes.

Initially the members of this Society might make a point, as a matter of course, of asking for acknowledgement. The simplest device would be to type one's name at the foot of the index and express the hope in one's covering letter that this might be allowed to remain. If we all resolve to do so from now on, I feel sure the acceptance rate ought to be encouraging. Those indexers who really wish or need to remain anonymous could adopt a pseudonym, just as some crossword compilers do.

As James Reeves said, why should a very hard-working, scholarly and skilled profession not be given its due?

I would like to thank Mr Michael Irwin for permission to reprint the letter by the late James Reeves, and the various editors who said I might quote from their remarks.

Corrections

The following corrections should be made to the relevant words in our last issue, page 89:

line 7: 'apQoravov
line 11: Graece Latine've

and the following reference inserted as the second citation in 'References to other works' on page 102: Knight, G. N. Book indexing in Great Britain: a brief history. Indexer, 6 (1968): 14-18; 69.  

'Tis a pitiful piece of knowledge that can be learnt from an index, and a poor ambition to be rich in the inventory of another's treasure.—Joseph Glanvill, The Vanity of Dogmatizing, xv (1661).  

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