Finding work in indexing

No published index, hence no publisher interested. No publisher interested, hence no published index.

Thus we have the egg-chicken-egg situation applied to indexing. Such a problem is by no means confined to the craft of indexing. It also applies to many other crafts—writing, painting, picture-framing or what you will. First you must deserve to be asked to fulfil a commission; and for that you must equip yourself with the necessary expertise. This consists of learning and practice. The learning can be done through a correspondence course, by self-tuition, or by picking the brains of a practised indexer—and then comes the practice.

I do not think it fair that publishers should necessarily have to pay apprentices for their work. Every skill worth acquiring has to be got at some cost in time and effort to the apprentice. I find it rather alarming that so many indexers, who can give little proof of their knowledge, even after finishing a correspondence course with high marks, should consider they are worth employing at exactly the same rate as indexers of many years' standing. Even more alarming is the belief of the novice indexer that he can provide an adequate index to a book on any subject at any level.

An indexer who is found competent by our Society's Board of Assessors, once placed on the Register, should with luck in time build up a reputation which will provide a flow of work. (It should be remembered that the index on which the Board makes its judgement does not have to have been published.)

But a lot will depend on the subject areas in which the indexer works and how well equipped he is to deal with the subjects in which he claims proficiency. Other factors, such as the area in which the indexer lives (i.e. in or near a big town or in a remote country area), and the general tactfulness, flexibility and conscientiousness with which he handles assignments, are also very important.

Many indexers are not members of the Society, and find indexing work. Generally speaking if they have not worked in a publisher's office themselves, they have relatives or friends who have made initial contacts for them. There are some very persistent would-be indexers who write dozens of letters seeking work, some of them fortunate in the timing of their letters—or even in the quality of their letter-writing. But it is a truism that any freelance worker in any field is successful in relation to the quality and nature of his contacts.

However, it should be remembered that the aims of the Society are, firstly, to improve the standard of indexing and secure a measure of uniformity in its technique; and only after that comes the aim of raising the status of indexers and safeguarding their interests. As Registrar of the Society for many years, with some hundreds of requests for indexers, I notice that those who observe that priority are for the most part the most successful and sought-after indexers.

Only when all indexers are members of the Society and work through the Society to raise standards, and when the Society itself can move from running on the generosity of a small group who donate much of their free time to the cause of indexing, to being able to afford paid staff and adequate facilities for training and publicity, will the idea be eradicated that any reasonably well-educated person, with a typewriter and nothing better to do, will be able to make money from indexing.

Books deserve good indexes and publishers should demand high standards if they place any intrinsic value on their products.

Elizabeth Wallis,
Registrar of The Society of Indexers.

* Indexes as selling points:

S From the letters of Louise Bogan: 'I have been unable to find anything truly readable anywhere, although I actually bought, for $1, one of those maudering, tenuous late S. Sitwells, because the index was so fascinating—ranging from (to begin in the middle) God on to Uganda, Walruses, Waldteufel, Witches, Yoshowara (beauties of the), to Zumbo (Gastano) and Zurbaran (Francisco).—What the woman lived, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., New York, 1973.'