The closing session

John Gordon gladdened all hearts by announcing that fees and fares for attending such a professional conference might be off-set against tax. He offered thanks to the Cambridge organizers for a splendid conference with excellent speakers, well planned and enjoyed by all. Constant stimulating arguments had developed, but friendliness, charm and intelligence had been abundant throughout, and there had been no dry patches.

It was agreed that 1983 should be the date for the next conference, perhaps at Bristol, York, Oxford or Bath.

Josephine McGovern said that she would take back a happy report to AusSI. They shared the UK Society’s problems of scattered membership, with their office bearers all centred round Melbourne.

Peter Greig told us the same applied to the Canadian Society, which also has not succeeded in establishing regional groups. He would like to see greater liaison between the different national Societies of Indexers. Most of our problems are similar, and we could benefit from each other’s solutions.

We considered setting up working parties to consider specific problems of administration and development; and whether indexers’ subject specializations might usefully be added to their names on The Society’s membership list.

The tale of an indexer and the law

Gerald Fowler-Bassett

Gerald Fowler-Bassett is the pseudonym of the Society’s only member in New Zealand, a medical technologist and public servant

When I started compiling end-of-book indexes I was offered an interesting job. The book was to be a limited edition of 200 copies at $150 each. (NZ $2.3 = £1.)

I estimated $185 and found that my cost-sheet came out at $425 because the author-publisher and his co-author had been such a nuisance, but I billed fees for $240. I had taken a risk; I guessed I would have to work for a loss but I hoped that the publicity would be useful and I was prepared to pay for it, even to $185; but eventually it cost me $305.

The co-author collaborated and at the last moment I did something stupid: she asked for the slips (cards 3 in. x 1 in.) and I surrendered them for a nominal fee. I sent off the manuscript-index and was about to make out the account when she started making complaints. I found that she had mutilated the typescript, mostly because of ignorance of the principles of indexing, but I said, ‘that is your privilege as an author’.

I sent out an invoice and, on the third monthly statement, I noted that I regretted I could not allow extended credit. A couple of months later, I did a round of the local debt-collectors.

‘Would you collect a bad debt for me?’

‘Come-in,’ they all said. ‘How much?’

‘Two-forty dollars.’

‘Take a seat. Who is it?’

They all refused, except the fourth and last, who looked at me and said, ‘Right.’

The author-publisher still refused to pay, on grounds that the index was unusable.

After two years, the duns’ lawyer obtained a hearing; a second hearing. He and I had two meetings, one in a library where a statutory-copy of the book had been deposited. The similarities between my index and the published index were undeniable, but the alterations were excusable.

I attended the court, as an observer, but outside the building the publisher’s lawyer offered a settlement. The duns’ lawyer had already pointed out to me that the money was peanuts. He looked over his shoulder at me. ‘We’re not settling, are we?’ ‘Good gracious, no,’ I said, and we went into the court. Neither the author-publisher, nor his co-author, nor two of his witnesses turned up. The magistrate started hearing the case. The lawyers retired after some discussion about the absent witnesses. The hearing resumed. The lawyers announced settlement in full. The magistrate stipulated two weeks to pay. The whole transaction cost me $120 in duns’ commission and legal fees.

In the meantime I had not had a contract for nearly two years; but there was irony. I have now indexed a manual on the industrial law of New Zealand. The editors and publishers are pleased with my work and do not seem to have made any alterations; in fact I have promise of more to come.

The law would not leave me alone. I received a cheque from the duns on the day I was called for jury-service, and after I had paid it into a bank I walked across the road and found the duns’ lawyer in a café. By a mere couple of weeks, I missed being called for jury-service on a high court case involving the publisher.

Oh, double, double irony!