

The nationwide provision and use of information: Aslib/IIS/LA conference

K. G. B. Bakewell

The first-ever joint conference of Aslib, the Institute of Information Scientists, and the Library Association, held in Sheffield 15-19 September 1980, was attended by some 900 people.

The conference, with the theme 'The nationwide provision and use of information', opened with a stimulating address by Professor W. L. Saunders, President of the Library Association and Director of the University of Sheffield Postgraduate School of Librarianship and Information Science, on 'Information, the unscarce resource'. Professor Saunders pointed out that, in a world of scarcities, information is one resource which is available in abundance. He called for a major drive on 'information illiteracy' and drew particular attention to two themes very close to his heart—the need to improve school library provision and so develop information-consciousness at an early age, and the desirability of closer co-operation in information provision and dissemination—such as is now being achieved among libraries in Sheffield.

Professor Saunders's Presidential Address was followed by eight general papers on a variety of topics—'Do we really need libraries?' 'Identifying information needs', 'Ignoring the user', 'Freedom of information', 'Ownership and control of information', 'A Common Market of information', 'Information for a dynamic society' and 'Professionalism and the future'. The last two papers, by Sir Montague Finniston (replacing Sir Keith Joseph at very short notice) and Douglas Foskett, provided an inspiring conclusion to the conference. They had been preceded by a rather less than inspiring contribution on government policy for the nationwide provision of information at national, regional and local level, by the Under-Secretary of State at the Office of Arts and Libraries (Neil Macfarlane, MP).

In addition to these plenary sessions, there were 19 parallel sessions, one of which was organized jointly by the Library Association Cataloguing and Indexing Group and The Society of Indexers. An attendance of 50 at this session was satisfactory in view of the many counter-attractions—no fewer than four parallel sessions and five visits taking place at the same time. The audience included one of The Society's overseas members, H. A. (Tony) Rydings, Librarian of the University of Hong Kong.

The Chairman of the Cataloguing and Indexing Group/Society of Indexers session, Geoffrey

Hamilton, began by outlining the development and activities of The Society for the benefit of members of the audience who may not have been aware of its existence (and, we, hope, for the benefit of The Society too!) He then introduced three speakers to deal with the theme, 'The index: access or barrier to information?': Ken Bakewell (Principal Lecturer at Liverpool Polytechnic's School of Librarianship and Information Studies, and Vice-Chairman of The Society of Indexers); Christina Beale (Research Officer at the University of Sheffield's Centre for Research on User Studies); and Alan Wheatley (Senior Lecturer at the College of Librarianship Wales, Aberystwyth).

Ken Bakewell drew attention to the inadequacies of some book indexes and made suggestions for improving the situation, including better author-publisher-indexer relations, greater recognition by librarians and information scientists of the skills of book indexers, and more use by book indexers of thesauri and indexing techniques rather than reliance on intuition; he also mentioned the role of the layout of the index in improving methods of access to information.

Christina Beale returned to one of the themes of Professor Saunders's Presidential Address, stressing the importance of teaching the use of book indexes in schools. She referred to Michael Marland's paper at The Society of Indexers's 1978 conference, and particularly to the value of an index in 'unorganizing' the author's organization and allowing the reader to make his own reorganization. She outlined past work on evaluating the effectiveness of indexing systems from the user's point of view, and suggested future lines of research; and made observations on index searching, including person-computer interaction in on-line systems.

Alan Wheatley, looking into the future, painted a gloomy picture for manual indexers, as costs of executing computerized operations are falling and will continue to do so, while the costs of executing manual operations are rising and will continue to do so. Users' needs for eye-readable indexes will, he suggested, remain high but 'direct human intervention' in indexing will decline and co-operative indexing will increase. There will be more computer-produced keyword indexes based on titles, supplemented by machine-generated thesauri in order to generate cross-references in response to word occurrence and to control synonyms.

All three papers appear in full in the proceedings of the conference published by the Library Association in January 1981 at £12.50 (ISBN 0-85365-563-4), together with several other papers of possible interest to the indexer such as 'Publishing and bookselling: the shape of things to come, by Julian Blackwell, and various papers on computerized information retrieval.

There were 94 stands in the excellent exhibition of library suppliers, furnishers, publishers, booksellers and computerized services; and Lord Kearton particularly commented on the British Library stands during his closing remarks. It is a pity that the Bowker Publishing Company did not consider it appropriate to display *Indexers on Indexing* on its stand.

Compensations of indexing

Rebecca Smith

Why do I like this job so much? The mother of three small children, living in a far from stimulating, remote area, in a wildly untidy house with no appearance of organization, a life apparently too hectic to allow a job to be fitted in. . . .

Then there are the pangs of self-doubt; the thought of judgement of other indexers when the book is published—'who did this? Not an accomplished indexer!', they may wonder. With philosophy as one of my specialist subjects I am exposed to some very abstruse and convoluted works—with little knowledge of some areas of the subject. I worry about needing to contact the author and reveal my ignorance, making a crashing blunder or including a meaningless reference. . . .

But still, when a telephone call comes from a publisher, I agree to undertake the job, however busy I may be, and feel the same thrill, even when tinged with panic. I look through the proofs when they arrive with the magic feeling of one embarking on a creative task, just as in writing the first word on a sheet of paper. Even a slightly sinking sensation on finding that this particular index is going to be heavy going disappears as, with the eldest child at school, the others settled to absorbing activities, my equipment set about me and my mind cleared for the task, I settle to it.

Since I was a child, publishing has held an aura of glamour for me, and knowing the publishing world more closely has increased my excitement. I love seeing important new books in their embryonic proof stage, and feel I really belong there when a book that I have indexed is reviewed.

As for the actual discipline of indexing; it provides a focus for our day, and more gets done when each minute has to be planned. On my working days there must be a small area of order in the house, in great contrast with its surroundings. I concentrate totally on the text in hand—find references 50 pages back, compose neat phrases to summarize a page of abstract thought—and feel my brain sparking as nowadays it seldom can. For a while I can enjoy the sensation of

being a real academic. I take pride in the speed with which I compile an index, usually returning it several days earlier than the publisher's deadline. I almost equally enjoy proofreading, charging a different hourly rate; finding a mistake in proofs is a little thrill every time.

I enjoy browsing through other people's indexes, spotting possible improvements, and gaining a feeling of superiority if I find a really inadequate index to an important book, thinking how much better I could have done it. I enjoy the money earned from indexing; as do my children, for I usually reward them for being good and quiet by buying special presents when the cheque arrives.

At this stage in my career, tied to the house with a brain itching to be properly used, I find compiling indexes a useful, challenging discipline which puts me in touch with the wider world of books and people.

Articles of interest

Ken Bakewell, our Society's vice-chairman, writes in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* No. 412, 26 September 1980, p. 12, of the complexities of index compilation and the guidance available; 'How to let your fingers do the walking, and not lose the way.'

'Printed indexes to later 19C Probate records' by Jeremy Gibson appears in *Family History News and Digest*, 2 (4) Autumn 1980, 123-5.

PASCAL, MISTRAL et DIANE

'Bases de données et centres serveurs' is the title of a special number of *Documentaliste* (vol. 17, no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 1980) devoted to a survey of data bases and information services, national and international, originating or available in France.

As a contribution to the International Year of the Child (1979), staff members of the All-Union State Library of Moscow compiled an index of Russian and other authors of children's books: *Bibliographical index on books for children*.