

Indexing indecisions

The Brains Trust held by The Society on 2 October 1980 was well attended and produced lively open discussion rather than a sequence of questions and answers. Lucy Pollard (new deputy editor, *The Indexer*), Elizabeth Wallis (Registrar of The Society), Ann Hoffmann (Publications Officer) and Richard Raper (former Chairman), were our Panel.

Various topics were discussed; how to start an indexing career, where to find answers to particular problems arising as we worked. In particular we considered the fitness or otherwise of authors to index their own books. Elizabeth Wallis thought them too closely involved with the text and style to take an analytical, logical view of it—as well as too exhausted; but Ann Hoffmann, herself an author who had years before been asked by a publisher to index her own book, had thus become an indexer, via one of the courses L. M. Harrod had then run for The Society. She regarded an author who did learn the techniques of indexing as the right person to index his book. Neil Fisk suggested it was a matter of personality; A. P. Herbert he adduced as an excellent author/indexer, Winston Churchill as an author awful to contemplate as indexer.

What publishers require of indexes was considered, and the lack of formal training for entering publishing regarded as resulting in indexing being not understood, and undervalued by publishers. We were glad to hear of the programme of courses in publishing to be run by the Unwin Foundation Training Centre in the new premises of the National Book League at Wandsworth; a talk on indexing will be included.

Time allowed for compiling indexes was regarded as insufficient, three weeks being granted only with difficulty in some cases, and indexing compressed when the publisher's schedule had met with earlier delays. Ann Hoffmann suggested that in fact, a safety margin is always allowed by the publisher. As to pre-booking of indexers, Lucy Pollard preferred requests to work immediately, for carefully dove-tailed advance bookings collapse as schedules are rarely adhered to.

Richard Raper deplored the lack of market research to establish whether the inclusion of an index in fact helped to sell books or not, but John Gordon regarded this as a dangerous question to put to publishers. Elizabeth Wallis wondered how the convention had arisen, that non-fiction books should include indexes, and why it was perpetuated, when in fact so many indexes are so bad. We wondered whether a poor index was better or worse than none.

Cherry Lavell spoke for the ordinary reader, as opposed to those librarians, research workers and

information officers for whose benefit, perhaps, indexers are working. There are still those who read whole books right through, to whom indexes are irrelevant!

The professional status of indexing was considered. Elizabeth Wallis thought we must overcome the pin-money, cottage-industry image of indexing, by working at all times in a professional manner. It is a difficult status for us to achieve, however, with publishers' editors unaware of what they should expect from an index, untrained and inexperienced indexers possibly undercutting the professionals, and individual self-advertisement unrestrained. She regarded the state of indexing at the moment as anarchistic, amateurish and naïve.

The question, 'What is a good index?' could have engaged us all night. Posing it, John Gordon (Chairman) said that the indexer must satisfy both The Society of Indexers and publishers that he was a good indexer; these being two quite different matters. Publishers, the employers, might be satisfied with very bad indexes; the Registrar of The Society must be our guardian of standards. We hope to remind entrants to The Society of these, and help them to improve. 'What is a good index?' was almost unanswerable, and would get different replies from all present. It was very easy to say what is wrong with an index; very difficult to say what is good, as our Board of Assessors and Wheatley Medal Award Panel try constantly to do.

H. K. B.

Estimating for indexing

I have devised a method of working out estimates for indexes offered, based on indexes produced over many years. From my records I compiled a list relating the number of pages in each book to the number of hours' work finally claimed for (which includes typing, reading, correspondence and despatch). This yielded a range of difficulty varying from 19 pages worked per hour on a small, simple guide to fishing, to 4½ pages per hour for large, abstruse, multi-author works of psychology or anthropology.

When offered a book to index now, I look at it to see which degree of complexity in the books I have indexed in the past it seems to correspond to, assume I will work on it at that number of pages per hour (allowing for page size variation), estimate the number of hours accordingly, and multiply by The Society of Indexers' recommended hourly rate.

H. K. B.