The Wheatley Medal—twenty years old

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Chairman of the Panel for awarding the Wheatley Medal; editor of The Indexer, 1964-78; Vice-President of the Society of Indexers

About two years after the formation of the Society of Indexers in 1957, it was considered that the quality of indexes to publications might be improved if an award of some kind could be made annually to encourage the compilation of indexes of better standard than was then usual.

Librarians among the members of the Society knew of the award by the Library Association of the Carnegie Medal since 1935 for an outstanding book for children written by a British subject, and also of the award since 1955 of the Kate Greenaway Medal to the illustrator of a children's book. Their public presentation had aroused considerable interest not only amongst librarians but also amongst authors and illustrators, and above all, publishers.

The Council of the Society of Indexers thought that if a medal could be awarded annually for an outstanding index it would both encourage the compilation of better indexes and awaken publishers to the need to see that the books they published contained comprehensive and adequate indexes.

The Society was young, not very well known, and rather impecunious, and it was considered that if the Library Association, with its experience with the Carnegie and Greenaway medals, could be encouraged to take a practical interest in an award for an outstanding index, this might help considerably to improve the quality of indexes then being compiled. The Chairman of Council (James C. Thornton) and the Secretary of the Society (G. Norman Knight) met officials of the Library Association, and this body agreed to award annually a medal for an outstanding index which had been compiled and first published in the previous year. The adjudication of the indexes submitted for the award would be by a panel of six: four members of the Society of Indexers and two of the Library Association.

Over the years, the conditions for the award have been varied by the Library Association after considering various recommendations. Adjudicators meet in committee to make their decision after individually scrutinizing very carefully every index submitted for consideration by members of both organizations and by publishers. For at least ten years now there have been three adjudicators from the LA and three from SI, a representative from each taking it in turn to be chairman of the adjudicating committee.

In announcing the institution of the Wheatley Medal Award, the Library Association Record said,' 'The Library Association has, through the award of the Carnegie and, latterly, the Kate Greenaway Medals, showed interest in raising the standards of publishing for them.

'Now by the institution of the Wheatley Medal, the
Association will extend its activities to a field which concerns librarians closely but which is often neglected by British publishers—that of the book index. It is hoped that by the provision by the Library Association of an annual award for the book which sets out an outstandingly high standard in the quality of its index, publishers will become increasingly aware of the importance of this essential part of a subject book.

It stated also that Henry Benjamin Wheatley was the ‘father of British indexing’.

H. B. Wheatley

Wheatley was extremely active; an editor of publishers’ series and of books, an author, and an official of national learned organizations. His publications fill 4½ columns of the British Museum catalogue of printed books. He compiled the encyclopaedic London past and present, and held important administrative positions in national learned societies such as the Early English Text Society, the Bibliographical Society, the Samuel Pepys Club, and the London Topographical Society.

He wrote What is an index? which was published in 1878 as the first publication of a short-lived Index Society, but his real importance to indexers was his How to make an index of 1902,¹ which was the most important guide for indexers for many years.

Causes of bad indexing

One thing which militates against good indexing may not always be lack of ability of the indexer, but restrictions imposed by the publisher. Sometimes, when he knows how many pages a text will take, he will say that the surplus number of pages left in the sheets of paper to be used—and no more—must accommodate the index, which will have to be limited to fit into this space. Often publishers’ editors, or their junior colleagues who deal with indexers, know nothing about the compilation of indexes, and will say so. There are sometimes ways to get round this problem of space; for example, to use smaller type or to indulge in the deplorable practice of ‘running on’ large numbers of subheadings which should for easy finding of required entries be indented.

Another cause of poor indexes is that an author’s contract says that the author must provide the index—and he thinks that he must personally compile it, and may have not the ghost of an idea how to do it. The publisher may fail to tell him that he can find someone from the Registrar of the Society of Indexers who can compile it for him.

It is almost impossible to determine to what extent the award of the Medal has influenced the standard of indexing, but it must have been considerable. There is still much to be done before indexing is of a generally high standard. There have been other influences at work as well as the Medal, such as the lecture courses which have been organized by the Society over the years, the correspondence courses which selected members have prepared for a leading correspondence college, the lectures which are arranged in London each winter, week-end courses in the provinces, and the articles in The Indexer have all had their influence. But there can be no doubt that if an indexer sets out to make the best possible index, however much the publisher may harass him to complete the index by a given date or in a limited number of pages, checks his entries for cross-references and double entries, provides adequate subheadings, checks his alphabetization, and generally complies with the tenets of what he knows to be good indexing, there is every chance that if his index is submitted for adjudication, he may win the Wheatley Medal.

References

1. Library Association Record. (63), 1961, p.173
2. The Indexer 8 (2) Oct. 1972, 94–5
3. The Indexer 11 (3) April 1979, 172

Winners of the Wheatley Medal

1962 Michael Maclagan, index to Clemency Canning (Macmillan)
1963 J. M. Dickie, index to How to catch trout, 3rd ed. (Chambers)
1964 Guy Parsloe, index to The Wardens’ Accounts of the Worshipful Company of Founders of the City of London, 1497–1681 (Athlone Press)
1965 Alison Quinn, ‘modern index’ to The Principall Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation (Cambridge University Press)
1966 no award made
1967 G. Norman Knight, index to Winston S. Churchill, Vol. 2 (Heinemann)
1968 Doreen Blake and Ruth E. M. Bowden, index to The Journal of Anatomy: The first 100 years, 1866–1966 (Cambridge University Press)

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A keyword index on microfiche and an STC online

Long both in period covered and in its sequence of entries displayed, the British Library Lending Division's cumulated edition on microfiche of its Index of conference proceedings received 1964–1981 (Boston Spa: BLLD Publications Section, 1982. £75 (plus handling charge of £2.50 for orders from abroad) packs into little space entries for 146,000 conferences, symposia and seminars. Under keywords taken from titles, conferences are listed in date order, giving the full name of the conference, the place where it was held, and the location of the text on the BLLD's shelves. (All the texts are available through the normal loan and photocopy services.)

Although the BLLD began as the National Lending Library for Science and Technology, the transfer of the stock of the National Central Library to the custody of the BLLD in 1973 added the humanities to the fields of natural sciences, technologies and social sciences, so that no subjects are excluded. The earliest text available is a facsimile reprint of the records of the Federal Convention of 1787!

For eighteenth-century publications printed in Britain and its colonies and imprints in English from other parts of the world, the British Library has produced an online catalogue—the Eighteenth-century Short-Title Catalogue (ESTC)—which contains bibliographic records for 135,000 books, pamphlets and ephemera. The data base at present records only British Library holdings, but to those will be added records from more than 500 libraries from all over the world.

Subject searching is possible in so far as sought terms occur in titles, since all titles are accessible through individual words or phrases. The data of historical bibliography are also available, because imprints, languages and forms of publication, together with present locations, are similarly available. Bibliographic evidence of what moved the British people in various places and at various times during the eighteenth century can also be recovered by interrogating the file with an appropriate combination of subject terms, place names and dates.

The data base is accessible through the British Library automated information service BLAISE-LINE to libraries which are subscribers to the service, to visitors to the Bloomsbury Reading Room, and to postal enquirers through the BLAISE-LINE Search Service (7 Rathbone Street, London W1P 2AL). In the United States ESTC is available through the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN).

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