Inside the rainbow

The Society of Indexers' Annual General Meeting of 1984 was addressed by Dr Dennis Lewis, Director of Aslib, on the theme of the convergence of librarianship, archive work, information technology, etc., as a single profession, with indexing being part of the spectrum in which all information managers are concerned.

Our allies remain close; our work may overlap with that of others. Our Canadian Society is actually entitled in full 'The Indexing and Abstracting Society of Canada'. Former President of the American Society of Indexers, Dorothy Thomas, wrote in this journal in October 1984, 'The term, index, has been expanded and co-opted in so many other fields that its usage by the publishing industry ... is now barely identifiable as an entity'. She told how a project of the Association of American Publishers classified indexers with authors, and suggested that indexers retitle themselves, 'data base constructors'. The Society of Indexers is 'An organization in liaison with the Library Association', holds its meetings on LA premises, and has a Council composed chiefly of ALAs and FLAs. With friends like these, who needs their own territory? Is there really a separate entity, indexing, and separate workers, indexers, who are specifically that?

The answer was certainly felt to be yes in 1957, when Gilfred Norman Knight, lonely freelance indexer, advertised in The Times for congenial co-workers, and thus founded SI. Its original members were chiefly back-of-the-book freelancers—one might argue, practitioners of indexing in its purest form. The years since then have brought developments in technology that have made possible great changes in our working methods, and increases in both numbers and scope of our membership. But specific differences between the professions listed above remain.

All indexers must be abstractors: to devise an apt subject heading is to provide the most precise, most concise abstract of a paragraph—but abstractors have no need to be indexers. Indexers may be computer-users, merely as a mechanical means to achieve the work they compose mentally; computers cannot be indexers. Indexers do not pretend to be authors, but sometimes slap the wrists of authors who attempt the indexing of their works. Some librarians are indexers, but not all indexers are librarians. Bibliographers compile systematic or enumerative lists of publications or describe books as physical objects in their historical setting; librarians organize entire collections of books, shelving, locating, cataloguing, maintaining, making available, differentiating and classifying them as units within the whole. The indexer's concern is only within the covers, investigating and analysing the contents—text and ideas—of a single individual volume or journal at a time, in closest focus. Librarians marshal whole armies; indexers minister to individual soldiers. Perhaps the difference in scale for information location is comparable to that between atlases and large-scale parish maps.

Within indexing itself there are subdivisions and subspecialisms; the latest issue of SI's annual Indexers Available (1987–88, No. 6) lists 69 subject specialist groups, from Accounting to Women's Studies, as well as the special skills of indexing atlases, collections, and databases, and of cumulative indexing.

The qualities required for indexing have been described by P. Paulson (in the foreword to Cumulative index to the Proceedings of the British Academy, 1971) as: 'breadth of knowledge, familiarity with a wide variety of terms in all of their nuances, an ability to classify concepts and to establish relationships between them, and an enormous capacity for consistency, self-discipline, and hard work'; while the University of Chicago Press's A manual of style requires that indexers should be 'intelligent, widely read, well acquainted with publishing practices ... level-headed, patient, scrupulous in handling of detail, and analytically minded ... work at top speed'. These must be accepted as combinations of qualities rare in every sense.

Indexers do assuredly have their own territory within the information management spectrum; that closest to the text—perhaps the violet range, on the inner, narrower side of the rainbow.