Mary Petherbridge was born in London in 1870, and after taking a first Natural Sciences Tripos in 1893 worked as a librarian at the People's Palace, London for a year, then established the Secretarial Bureau in London, where she offered translation and library work, general secretarial services, and also training in secretarial work and indexing. In 1904 she published a manual, *The technique of indexing* (London: Secretarial Bureau, 1904), based on the 1891 edition of Charles Cutter's *Rules for a dictionary catalogue*, and wrote an article on 'Indexing' for the 1914 volume of *The Englishwoman's year book and directory*, printed in the 'Employments and Professions' section. In this she treats indexing as an occupation in its own right, stressing the importance of training.

As a freelance indexer, she worked for various publishers, institutions and government departments, particularly the India Office, until her death in 1940: an early epitome of the freelance indexer.

The following article, 'Indexing As A Profession for Women' [sic], by Mary Petherbridge, described as 'Official Indexer of Government Publications', appeared in *Good Housekeeping* in September 1923.

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IT is difficult to write a descriptive article on such a technical subject as indexing, for it is caviare to the general. Only people who study and use books of reference know what an index should be. It should be the key to all the facts as well as to the names of people and places mentioned in the book. But often it is actually a list of names and numbers of pages arranged alphabetically and picked out of the book at the discretion of the indexer.

There is a great quantity of this work waiting to be done, but on the one hand the cost and on the other the supineness of the reading public make it difficult to obtain. The very qualities that go to the making of a good indexer are the reverse of those required for obtaining the work. The indexer works quietly in the background; the business woman must be continually in the public eye, always exerting initiative and organising power.

After getting the work, the next step is to study the Scheme of the index. Here the main things to consider are the outlook and the point of view of the reader or student who will eventually use it. A brilliant index, full of original and startling subject-headings, is an irritation rather than a help. The student generally wants to find his information indexed under the most commonplace and ordinary of subject headings. He has neither the time nor the desire to puzzle out or guess at every conceivable form of heading under which the ordinary fact may lurk. Hence, before beginning the index, think carefully of the future reader, and work all the time with him in view.

There are several kinds of indexes, differing widely one from the other.

(1) There are records—old and modern—which are approached from the historical point of view. In the case of ancient records, which are usually in manuscript, the index is called a Calendar, really a Register. Each entry is a brief summary of each document in the records, arranged chronologically. A précis-index, partly or
wholly arranged in chronological order, is the best kind of index for modern records.

(2) There are book indexes. Indexes are not machine made. Every book must have its own Scheme. The index must be considered according to the subject of the book and its probable readers. And here comes in a cardinal point—classification. The most useful form of index is one in which each fact is entered under a special class heading; allied headings are linked up by cross-references, so that no subject-heading may grow unwieldy and destroy the balance of the index.

Blue-books (government publications) are highly technical and require special handling.

(3) There are newspapers and magazines. These again fall into a special category, and can only be indexed by people actually in the know of newspaper and magazine work.

There are four stages in indexing:

(a) The writing of the slips;
(b) The alphabetising of them;
(c) The critical editing and its attendant research;
(d) The proof-reading, which must always be done by the indexer personally.

The first fifty or hundred pages of a book show its scope and trend and the writing of the slips is more or less experimental and open to later revision. Gradually, however, the Scheme of the index becomes clear and the work falls into definite form.

This brief outline shows that indexing as a profession requires arduous and, in most cases, long training. It is not work that can be learnt theoretically nor in class. Only individual teaching on actual work is any good for the training of a successful indexer. Slowly and painfully the apprentice begins her work, analysing each sentence, each paragraph, and writing up the index slips of all the facts and names therein mentioned. She must think everything out for herself with an occasional question, so that no subject-heading may grow unwieldy and destroy the balance of the index.

Indexing alone is not a career for any girl without private resources or a good job to fall back on at the end of her training. But allied with secretarial work, cataloguing, or palaeography, it is a very satisfactory second string to one’s bow. As the groundwork of a private secretary’s training it adds 90 per cent to efficiency.

Indexing and cataloguing are frequently confounded and you hear people talk of ‘indexing’ a library. This is a confusion of terms. One ‘indexes’ the contents of a book; one ‘catalogues’ the books in a library. An index is concerned with the minute structure of a book; a catalogue mainly with the title-page, although in a catalogue raisonné information is given about edition, illustrations, frontispiece, preface, number of pages, and anything of interest about the book.

Palaeography is the reading and transcription of old documents. It is highly skilled work and requires a knowledge of Latin, Old French, Provençal, and other mediaeval languages, as well as of the contractions of words commonly used in earlier times.

Work of this technical nature only appeals to people of good education and some degree of culture. Here I do not necessarily refer to University graduates. In my experience during the last twenty-five years, a clever girl straight from a good school, where she has been encouraged to read and think, is excellent training material for indexing and its allied subjects. He: mind is wonderfully ductile and plastic. She absorbs information and methods like the air she breathes. It is a joy to guide such a girl and to watch her getting into her stride, turning out her work carefully and methodically, using her critical faculties until her brain works like a keen-edged razor.

There are plenty of posts as filing clerks and a few as indexers in libraries, public institutions, and newspaper offices, but, mostly, indexing is piece-work, and, as I have said, the initiative necessary to get work and the capacity for doing it seldom run in double harness. Twice a year, during the book-publishing season, there is a brief period of book indexing, but publishers are always in a great hurry and, as a consequence, indexes are frequently meagre and scrappy, and this class of work alone does not provide a means of livelihood. To be remunerative, it must be allied with one of the other forms of work mentioned above.

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We are grateful to Peter Greig for supplying biographical details of Mary Petherbridge, and to Good Housekeeping for permission to reprint the article.