How I became an indexer

In 1969 The Indexer published a symposium of eight members' accounts of 'Why I am an indexer' (The Indexer 6 (4) August 1969, 165–73). Now, nearly twenty years later, other indexers write of recruitment and their entry to this profession. Readers are invited to send their own accounts for further instalments.

Authors as indexers

I was quite convinced that my indexing 'career' began in the late 1950s until I happened to look into a couple of books on my shelves that have survived from my 'teens and discovered that I had provided each of them with an index inside the back cover. At that stage in my life I was an enthusiastic bird-watcher and it seems that I inadvertently ventured into the field of indexing fiction, since my copy of Arthur Ransome's Coot Club is provided with an index of all the species of birds mentioned in the story. So much for my juvenilia.

Although the unashamed annotating of books (my own, not other people's or the library's, and always in pencil, never in ball-pen) continued throughout my student years, my serious indexing did not begin until 1954 and was triggered by an appeal from the editor of the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society for someone to produce a general index. The Proceedings had then reached the 28th biennial volume. Each volume had its own index, but clearly a single comprehensive index to the whole series was moving from the 'highly desirable' to the 'indispensable' category.

At that time I was beginning to consider possible topics for a post-graduate thesis in the field of British Methodist history. It was obviously desirable to discover as much as possible about what was already in print, in periodical as well as book form. So I responded to the editor's plea, thinking that such a task would serve a useful double purpose. I naively imagined him overwhelmed by an avalanche of offers from members eager to involve themselves in the Society's activities and be of service to their fellow-members. On the contrary, mine was, of course, the only offer and was accepted with alacrity (and probably some misgivings as to my sanity).

Looking back, I am less impressed by my naivety and almost total ignorance of what the undertaking involved (which was predictable enough) than by the quite sensible way in which I tackled it. Realizing that there must be right and wrong ways of going about the job, I began by discovering what books were available on the subject and reading those I could lay hands on. At the same time I initiated a correspondence with the editor from which emerged a set of agreed principles to serve as guidelines.

It soon became clear that the volume indexes were of limited value to me, and that certainly I could not compile the new index by any process of conflation. Their scope and quality varied far too widely. Nevertheless, at a much later stage I was fortunate to have the help of a number of volunteers in comparing my own draft index with the volume indexes, and this proved a useful and reassuring check.

When I started I had little idea how long the task might take, and indeed I was in no great hurry to complete it, the reading involved being interesting and valuable enough in its own right. In fact, by throwing up a particular name in a wide variety of contexts, the indexing gave me the subject I needed for my thesis.

In the event, the index was not published until 1960, six years after I had begun work. But this was partly because of a hitch which might have been foreseen and averted, but in the end resulted in an improved index. I had kept in close touch with the editor of the Proceedings throughout and eventually submitted a draft of my index to him. In due course, and rather to my surprise, I received a letter not from him but from the Secretary of the Society, thanking me for all the work I had put in, but indicating that my index was unacceptable in a number of ways and could be printed only if extensively revised.

My reply to this bombshell was a detailed one which it gave me considerable enjoyment to compose. It consisted mainly of quotations from my correspondence with the editor to show that at point after point I was being asked to revoke decisions that had been made by us jointly. My predictable conclusion was that if they really wanted an index they had better get their act together and decide just what kind it should be. Penitence and a moving reconciliation swiftly followed and an extensive revision was undertaken, though without any major changes of policy.
In the closing stages, an examination of the indexes to the individual volumes revealed a high proportion of references that were missing from mine. This was a disturbing discovery and a moment of panic ensued. However, on closer examination all but a few of the missing references turned out to be too insignificant or too uninformative to qualify for admission. This provided what was probably the most instructive part of the whole venture and the most valuable contribution to my indexing apprenticeship. It helped me to recognize the need to temper comprehensiveness with selectivity based on contextual significance. In a journal devoted to Methodist history and read largely by people well informed in the subject, there is no point at all in indexing every passing reference to such a well-known fact as John Wesley's 'conversion' on 24 May 1738; but in some cases the context in which this is referred to gives it significance and justifies an entry. But the context we are dealing with here is a conceptual one, not the verbal one with which so much contemporary indexing is concerned.

Were I beginning that particular index now, with thirty years of miscellaneous experience behind me, I would certainly tackle it in some respects quite differently and, I hope, make a better job of it. But there is genuine satisfaction in knowing that a generation of scholars has found it useful. So, for that matter, have I.

JOHN A. VICKERS
Bognor Regis, W. Sussex

From eight to the eighties

I think I may say that I grew up with indexing. My parents wrote books and indexed them, and taught their children to use indexes. We also became acquainted with the process of proof-correction, and taught ourselves to type on their very early-model machine, both useful to a future indexer. When I was eight years old, I was given a chubby little atlas with a comprehensive index, over which I pored most assiduously.

Between the ages of thirteen and eighteen I edited our family magazine, which appeared at first monthly and then quarterly; I supplied annual indexes. When I was engaged in biochemical research, after leaving college, I was co-founder and for a time co-editor of our laboratory's annual journal, Brighter Biochemistry. My indexes to that owed something to the index in E. C. Bentley's Biography for beginners.

My first serious indexes were those to the three successive editions of my friend Marjory Stephenson's Bacterial metabolism. I am afraid the indexes were not worthy of the text.

When our children were old enough to allow me some spare time, I worked for a while for scientific abstract journals. One of these ceased publication; I was looking round for other work that could be done at home, and asked my friend Joseph Needham to advise. He kindly mentioned me to the Cambridge University Press, and they gave me some indexing work. I soon decided to give up abstracting in favour of indexing. Through seeing a copy of The Indexer at C.U.P., I became aware of the existence of the Society of Indexers, joined it, and I read all I could find on the subject. Through various contacts, and with the help of the Registrar of the Society of Indexers, I was fortunate in obtaining commissions for indexes. My scientific background enabled me to accept scientific books for indexing, and thus to keep up to date, to some extent, with my own subject, and with my husband's scientific work.

In spite of its early beginnings, my active indexing career did not really start until I was sixty. It lasted for twenty-four years, until my eyesight became inadequate.

M. D. ANDERSON
Cambridge

Author— indexer— metalsmith— talent scout

I list myself as an indexer and a metalsmith as well. There is really no mystery here: the latter trade—described in an eighteenth-century source as 'the most genteel of all in the mechanic way', is still an honorable one, and a wonderful medium for expression in the visual arts; I came to it as a sculptor fresh out of college and have kept my own shop from the start. (You will be familiar with Longfellow's hoary classic on Paul Revere's Ride; I grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts, where the colonial silversmith is still regarded as something of a role-model, if not, indeed, a demigod.) I am at present Treasurer of Directions, an association of professional craftspeople of the state of Maine, and one of my first books published was Silversmithing: a basic manual—the only book ever written by me without an index, oddly enough (and over my objections, but as none of the other titles in the series—of which it was the eighth and last—had an index, I was overruled).

I came to indexing first, then, as an author; my family has worked in and around the publishing trades for four generations including mine—printers, editors, proof-readers, authors, and indexers. Indeed, it was out of some reluctance to follow the family trade that I did not do any freelance work of this sort until my shop had already been well established. Nevertheless, the seasonal nature of the work in all crafts, at least in New England, made the offer of such work irresistible when a former trainee of my aunt's offered me proofreading assignments in the late 1970s, and on completing my first non-author index in 1978, and discovering that I was good at it, I began supplementing metalwork with indexing in the off-season. As it has turned out, the latter is in such
demand that I now am offered more indexing than I could possibly do even if I did nothing else; most of this work I field to those I have trained.

I would not be surprised to find that eclecticism is more the rule than the exception in the introduction to indexing: our work places a premium on general knowledge (that is, knowing at least something about a great many things) in addition to the specialized field of indexing in which we profess to be knowledgeable and the mechanical skills of indexing as a practice. I have likened it elsewhere to being sent to school, and paid for the mechanical skills of indexing as a practice. I have indexed in which we profess to be knowledgeable and it, but having one's courses chosen for one more or less at random—surely a benign means of continuing education!

Though familiar enough with the life of the publishing freelancer in general, I have found indexers rare, good ones even rarer. For this reason I have been at some pains to try to recruit possible new ones. One finds them in the oddest places, their lights hidden under a variety of bushels; my latest candidate I met at a craft fair, making and selling candles. Many a good indexer lies undiscovered, one suspects, for lack of anyone thinking to see the potential and offering an invitation to have a (carefully supervised) whack at it. Of course, of those who might make good indexers, relatively few can stand the intensity of living on such intimate terms with a book on such short notice.

NICHOLAS D. HUMEZ
Portland, ME, USA

'Pay you a hundred pounds . . .'

Call it chance, fate, divine providence, what you will. I had gone to see a publisher about a new edition of one of my books. I had a new editor and she seemed to be new to publishing. She had a pile of proofs on her desk. When we had done our business, she asked me quietly if I had done any indexing, and I told her I had always indexed my own books. Tapping the proofs, she asked me if I would index a book for her, and as I hesitated she hissed: 'Pay you a hundred pounds'. Now, I am not one that lightly turns down a hundred pounds and I said I would do it. I sent it to her a fortnight later; I blush now to think how bad it must have been. About a month later I got a cheque for a hundred pounds. What surprised me was not the amount, which was of course expected, but the speed with which I got it. As an author I knew that it might take me a year to write a book, anything up to a year to get a publisher to accept it, and perhaps another year before I got any money for it. Never before had I received so quick a reward.

I began to scent that there might be something for me in this business of indexing. But I did not know if the sum I had got for the index was a reasonable one. I asked the Society of Authors, of which I was a member; the Society did not know and suggested that I asked the Society of Indexers. This was the first time I had heard of the Society of Indexers or of professional indexers. I had had books published by four leading publishers and none of them had told me that there were indexers, and my contracts had always bluntly stated: 'The author will provide an index'. I ascertained that the subscription to the Society of Indexers was, I think, £5, and I thought that I could hardly expect the Society to give out information to someone who was not a member. So I joined and started the training course.

And that is how I became an indexer.

JOHN GIBSON
Wichenford, Worcs

We must have a long talk together . . .

In the summer of 1985 I had been for more than two years a fully qualified medical doctor. There were then too many young doctors for the jobs available, however. As I wanted to work I took a job as a representative of Yugotours, a travel firm, and I found myself at Hvar, a little town on an island of the same name in the Adriatic Sea, well known for its mild climate, gentle softness and natural beauties. And what I was supposed to do was to look after its English visitors. I had been warned that English visitors were difficult to look after and were always complaining—I quickly found this to be true. In representatives' jokes the Englishman was always 'the visitor who is in the wrong room'. It was about midnight when my first party arrived. I kept that famous professional smile on my face, but I met an elderly gentleman* who made a fuss when I told him that he could not stay in the hotel of his choice because it was not open, and that I had assigned him a room in another hotel. He instantly protested that he did not like this other hotel. I tried to persuade him but to my chagrin he seemed to know much more about Hvar and its hotels than I did. Somehow I managed to arrange him a transfer the next day to a hotel he approved of.

The next morning he thanked me for what I had done for him, and then quite unexpectedly he asked 'What job do you do?' I told him that I was a Yugotours representative, as was obvious. He pressed me, saying 'I know this is only a summer job. What do you really do?' After a little hesitation, I said: 'If you keep it to yourself, I will tell you, I am a medical doctor'; then to my surprise he whispered in my ear: 'Keep my secret. So am I'.

Some minutes later he came back to my desk and asked 'What do you know about indexing? We must have a long talk together'. I was left puzzled and could not guess what he was talking about. When I had finished my morning's duty we went and had coffee . . .

*See above. Ed.
together at a café on the quay, and he told me that he was an indexer of medical books and that possibly I could become one too. I asked ‘How do I learn the job?’ and he said ‘You have already begun’. And so, for the rest of his stay in Hvar and when he came back in the autumn for his second holiday, we sat each morning on the spacious terrace of the Hotel Palace, and I began to learn all about indexing beneath a clear blue sky and above the dark blue sparkling sea and the bustle of the harbour, with the honey-coloured walls of the town around us, a slight breeze rustling our papers.

That was how I became an indexer.

Thank you, my dear friend, for discovering to me the wonderful world and enigma of indexing.

OLIVERA POTPARIĆ
Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Home-based indexer

I became an indexer principally because my Big Sister made me become one. She was a social worker, I a housebound mother-of-two; her eye fell on me and she saw that it was not good. A friend had a sociology book which needed an index; and that was that.

I embarked on the task with great trepidation. I borrowed the public library’s entire stock on indexing (one volume.) I read the proofs twice. I rang the author and we had a tremendously ignorant discussion of what should be in the index. My librarian husband provided me with a stock of half-used book-selection slips and a nice little cardboard box. Eventually, with beating heart, I sat down and did it, leaning heavily on proper names and skating lightly over subjects. Then I typed it up—single-spaced, two columns to the page—and looking at it now I don’t think anyone in editorial could have read it either before or after setting.

It’s terrible. It’s too short—1.5% of the text. I hadn’t heard of the Society of Indexers so I didn’t know about limiting strings of page-references (I made one of 19). I used terribly general terms, with references from the more useful specific term, and for some mad reason I put brackets round all the see refs. That poor author must have really fancied my big sister for to my shame I see in the Acknowledgements ‘Thanks to Oula Jones who, under exacting circumstances “writes indexes to perfection’’. Oh dear!

However, that ignoble index served to show me two things. One, that this was a very convenient way of earning for a housebound mother-of-two; the other, that I loved doing it. To begin with, there was the romance of handling a book before ordinary mortals did; and I rejoiced to pick up a new book in a bookshop and see my work, there for posterity. Then there was the excitement of the chase as I ferreted through the Reference Library in search of a first name or a date. Occasionally I would find a mistake that no-one else had noticed (such as on a map where Austria was rechristened Poland). Despite the dryness of the text (and didn’t I get some horrors in the early days, I never turned any book down whether I knew anything about it or not) the achievement of winking out and neatly presenting an Important Fact was always satisfying. As I became, proof by proof, a Psychology specialist, I was able to recognize that here was the archetypal anal-obsessive personality nitpicking its way through the text. Strange terms would lodge themselves in my brain, re-emerging in dormant periods: ‘Hermetic-Cabalism’ I would hiss urgently in the dark of the night, startling my snoring spouse. Once an unfortunate typesetter chose to scatter the term ‘homeostasis’ thickly throughout one text: I am still stuck with that one. At parties I was quite unable to talk about anything other than my current text; at the dread opener ‘This book I’m doing just now . . .’ my husband learned to make himself scarce.

Becoming an indexer was, I found, a slow and gradual process. I wrote to a selection of publishers informing them that I was an indexer with a published index to boot, and to a man they replied, if at all, that they had no work just then. I hounded the editor of my published index for about a year and eventually he sent me an index to be done in four days. This I accomplished and almost immediately he sent me another one. Then one of the other companies sent me yet another last-minute job. I was in business at last, two years after my initial commission. After five or six years I was working for about fifteen publishers and getting through about 35 commissions a year, with ten or so others that for various reasons I was unable to take on. Then we moved from London to Edinburgh and I found that I had to start hunting for work again; apparently Bloomsbury felt nervous about entrusting its proofs to Arctic indexers.

Now that I am a hardened indexer the initial excitement has faded and, like Barbara Pym, what I enjoy most about indexing is the peaceful, total concentration required. It gets harder, I find, when the children become teenagers and Ghettoblasters Rule, but I look forward to peaceful, concentrated old age. I am happy to have made longstanding friendships over the phone with my editors, and to have earned the trust of my favourite and faithful author, Bernard Levin. But, although I may have become ‘user-friendly’ I have not yet become computer-compatible. Is there yet hope for me?

OLA JONES
Edinburgh

Indexer perforce

‘Some are born indexers, some achieve indexing, and some have indexing thrust upon ‘em’—as Shakespeare did not quite say—and I fall into the last of these
categories. Although I had always enjoyed keeping files in order during my misspent secretarial youth, and had enthusiastically helped my older sister with her card index to a film-review scrapbook, I had never looked seriously at indexing until my mid-thirties. I then found myself taking on, as a newly qualified archaeologist, the post of editor of a new Council for British Archaeology venture to provide abstracts on the archaeology of Britain and Ireland. Given a year to set it up, I soon realized that the index had to be the core of the whole operation, or the information I was so painstakingly gathering from nearly 300 journals would not be retrievable.

At that stage I even had to learn the difference between classifying and indexing! Worse still, I had to explain those arcane operations to the committee which oversaw my work. For twelve months my detailed planning described ever-decreasing spirals, since every aspect of the abstracts service seemed to depend on every other. My chief indexing bibles are of course (apart from this journal) Knight, Collison, and the British Standard,1,2,3 to which I return again and again.

A factor which both complicated and eased my task was the deep index to British archaeological publications already being produced annually by a colleague to a pattern set some 15 years before. I had to assume that this pattern was now familiar to, and expected by, most of my expected subscribers, yet I could see many ways in which it needed improvement. To this day I do not know whether I properly solved the dilemma of continuity versus necessary change.

One difficulty was that, searching the information retrieval literature as I might, I could find very little help with running an index to a serial publication: nearly all the references were aimed at library indexes, not published ones. The first year's operation might present no great problems, but in a discipline (or indiscipline, according to its severest critics!) where terminology runs quite unfettered it is clear that a retrieval problem of some magnitude soon arrives. Quite apart from terminology, there was the need to index each fresh abstract to the same level as its fellows and in consistency with any other abstracts on the same subject. Accordingly I constructed what I called a 'classified index' which would guide me in future years. This working tool had subject sections like Agriculture or Personal Ornaments, in which I listed all the words (and synonyms) relevant to those classes, whether processes like ploughing, tools like sickles, or items like brooches. Other sections dealt with houses and their fittings, weaponry, rural settlement and the like. Hence for any abstract I could consult the aide-memoire of likely index terms.

That all seemed fine, except that once I started producing abstracts the work was too fast and furious to allow much time for browsing through my elegant aide-memoire, which eventually began to gather dust on the shelf. It had probably served its purpose in clarifying my mind on the problems and how I expected to solve them. In any case I was also able to maintain, for some 15 years until work pressures choked it off too, a card index of all the abstracts I had produced, each with its index terms noted on it; this proved my most valuable aid to consistency.

As to my personal technology, I borrowed from J. E. Holmstrom4 the idea of a highly 'mechanized' manual system of typing entries on sticky labels which I then sorted and shingled on to foolscap sheets. I crossed out the main and sub-entry headings whenever these repeated, and added cross-references by hand. The result was just about fit to pass to a printer for composing. Although the separating, sorting and sticking of the labels was extremely tedious, the entering of cross-references was relatively quick and easy. Three years ago I moved up to Macrex5 on our office Apricot, where the sorting and merging is done for me, but the cross-referencing seems (subjectively at least) to be more time-consuming than the old way. (There are other aspects of the computer-assisted operation that may make a story for another day!)

Now that there is a prospect of transferring my Abstracts operation to a fully computerized retrieval system, in which the six-monthly printed bulletin will be assembled on the machine and printed direct off disc, with the abstracts gradually building up a machine-searchable database, the whole indexing business will have to be reorganized. As a start, three or four years ago I assembled a thesaurus-like word list, from all the entries ever used in the annual indexes, and set about checking all their interrelationships. The list, in which each entry term is followed by a string of its related terms of (see also's) and (reference from's), would satisfy Liz Orna's description of a thesaurus.6 However, for the moment it seems advisable to call it an 'index authority list', mainly because it is not overtly hierarchical in structure. In any event, whenever I have an annual index nearly complete, I can now run through the authority list, adding to my index all the cross-references required by this year's content. This takes some time but is very reassuring as to consistency. After a little further tightening this list should be suitable for use in a fully computerized abstracts database. It is currently on circulation to selected members of the archaeological profession for their comments, and when complete will eventually be published to assist anyone compiling an archaeological index, whether for journal or monograph. Not that a thesaurus is ever finished... it requires constant renovation and maintenance, which at least will be easier in its computer form than when it was a scruffy annotated typescript.

From having had indexing thrust upon me I have become an enthusiast, even a bore, on the subject. As well as contributing a paper to this journal on the subject...
of indexing British archaeology, I have tried at several conferences to alert archaeologists to the dangers of bad indexing, especially in computer databases. Well, they do say converts are more fanatical than those born to it.

References
5. H. & D. Calvert, originators of macrex: 38 Rochester Road, London NW1 9JJ.


Of libraries great and small

The British Library (Library Association Library) has been renamed The British Library Information Sciences Service (BLISS). The library is to remain in its present location in Ridgmount Street for the next five years, after which period it is likely to be removed to join other British Library collections in St. Pancras. That is of interest to members of the Society of Indexers, as at present we have the privilege of using the library for reference and for borrowing, as well as for access to our own very small collection which BLISS continues most generously to house.

The British Library Research and Development Department, forced through lack of staff to discontinue its Newsletter, has now happily been able to resume dissemination of information about its activities by means of a bulletin that is to appear twice yearly, in winter and summer. The first issue of the new Research Bulletin (Winter 1987) gives news of current research supported by the Department, grants made for conference attendance and study visits, and grants made to other libraries for particular purposes, together with an annotated list of publications in 1987 that give the results of previously sponsored research.

The British Library Research and Development Department, together with the Library and Information Technology Centre, has launched a new information service called LIBs (Library and Information Briefings), which collects material on various technical and socio-economic changes affecting information workers, much of which has hitherto been scattered or unpublished and consequently difficult to obtain. LIBs aims to present the material in a convenient form, easy to read but authoritative. It covers the legal and political environ-

ments of information as well as the most significant new technologies such as CD-ROM, desktop publishing, Value Added Networks and Open Systems Interconnection. Subscribers receive regular packages of description, comment and analysis of important current developments, and reading lists.

The National Library of China is celebrating its 75th anniversary with the completion of a splendid new building. The collections antedate the founding of the library in the early years of the Republic. They can be traced back to the Imperial Library of the Southern Sung Dynasty and reflect the history and culture of China from its beginnings until the present day. (English summaries in Tushuguanxue tongxun = Bulletin of the China Society of Library Science 1987, no. 3.)

Looking to the future is a project to revive the glories of the Library of Alexandria. Founded at the end of the fourth century BC to house the literature of the world and to be a meeting place and an inspiration for scholars, it was destroyed during the civil wars of the third and fourth centuries AD. The Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt has decided to reconstruct and equip a new Alexandrian Library, to be, like its predecessor, a centre for study for the whole Mediterranean region. The University of Alexandria is drawing up a feasibility study for the project. The expense of such a vast undertaking could not be borne by Egypt alone. Aid has been sought from Unesco, whose Director-General launched an international appeal for the reincarnation of the library at the Unesco General Conference held in Paris in 1987. (Unisist Newsletter 6(1) 1988, 1-2.)

M.P.