OUP reference books: some recent additions

Philip Bradley

The year 1990 saw the relaunch of the *Oxford reference series* of paperbacks. By June about 20 of these had been published. Most are reprints or new editions of books originally published in hardback, but a few are new titles now being published in paperback only or in both paperback and hardback. The books in the series cover a wide range of subjects such as literature, medicine, art and artists, mathematics, law, music and the church. They are in the form of easy-to-use encyclopaedic dictionaries, and prices range approximately from £4.00 to £8.00.

Over the last few years the Oxford University Press has made considerable changes in its senior management, and has also given a large degree of independence to some of its overseas branches. Probably, the increase in the production of this series is part of this development. The demand for paperbacks is huge, perhaps spurred on by the difference in price of paperback and hardback titles: a recent Blackwell catalogue shows that the difference in price between the same title in these two bindings can be as much as £26.00 and differences in the region of £20.00 are common. Consequently purchasers, especially students, are likely to opt for the paperback versions.

Most of the books are of the 'concise' sort. They are average in content, containing the kind and level of information one would expect. They are relevant for indexers of the subjects they cover. Some books in the series, however, as well as some Oxford publications not in this series should be especially useful to indexers as well as to writers generally.

*The Oxford writers' dictionary* (compiled R. E. Allen, 1990, £5.95) (see *The Indexer*, 17 (2) Oct. 1990, 146) is a reprint with revisions of the well-known *Oxford dictionary for writers and editors* (1981). Actually the revisions are slight and not easy to detect, but the 10% increase in type size makes the book rather easier to read although, as one frequently finds with paperbacks, there may be difficulty in keeping it open.

Another book useful to anyone involved in writing is the *Oxford spelling dictionary* (compiled R. E. Allen, 1990, rep. of 1986 edn., £3.95). The editor advises the reader to use this in conjunction with the *Oxford writers' dictionary*. This *Spelling dictionary* is easy to use and very useful. It consists of only two elements: first a list of 60,000 words, taken from the *Concise Oxford dictionary*, that are liable to be misspelt; second, the way in which these words should be split if they have to be divided between two lines. For the first of these purposes the book is easy to use in that it does not include those other items—pronunciation, part of speech, meaning, origin, etc.—normally associated with a dictionary, and the mind is therefore not distracted by the multiplicity of tantalizing titbits which some users cannot resist reading. The spellings given are the correct version of words liable to be misspelt, and, in the case of words with alternative spellings, the version recommended by the OUP English Dictionaries Department. This book throws up some interesting variations of spelling when compared with other lexicographical authorities. OUP uses ski'd as the past tense of the verb to ski (although the *Concise Oxford dictionary* gives skied as an alternative). It seems odd that a word, except when used as a possessive or an abbreviation, should be given an apostrophe.

The second purpose is also important because dictionaries do not usually indicate where a break should take place when a word has to be divided. The application of common sense does not always produce the correct answer, and many people do not seem to realize that there are correct, or at least acceptable, dividing points, and simply break a word at the end of a line without thinking further on the matter. They also ignore the fact that a correctly divided word makes reading smoother. As the editor points out, it is not only the pronunciation of a printed word that is important, but also its appearance. Many words, when divided without adequate regard to their etymology look awkward or absurd, thereby drawing attention to the division when the aim is to make the division as natural and unobtrusive as possible. The computer must take some of the blame for this increasingly deep-seated problem. To be fair, though, programming a computer to recognize the correct hyphenation-point for every word that may occur is too complex an undertaking for typesetting at the present state of its development. Whatever the cause, to the lover of good English, and perhaps even more to the linguistic purist, correct breaks are important.

A third book of general use is the *Oxford reference dictionary* (edited J. M. Hawkins, hardback 1986, flexi-cover 1989, £9.95). It is not entirely clear whether this is in the *Oxford reference series*, but despite similarities of production it is probably not. Why should it be called a 'Reference' dictionary? Are not dictionaries by definition reference works? Perhaps OUP used this title because it is an encyclopaedic dictionary or it had run out of other
suitable titles, there being at least eleven of their English dictionaries in print (see The Indexer 15 (2), Oct. 1986, 100). For a dictionary of its size, quality and content it is very reasonably priced. Encyclopaedic in content, it also contains illustrations, appendices and maps: a most useful work. One should not carp, but there is at least one case in which a divided word in the Reference dictionary has a different break from that given in the Spelling dictionary. One may assume that the Reference dictionary was compiled with the use of a computer and that this is the cause.

More recently published was the eighth edition of the Concise Oxford dictionary (edited R. E. Allen, 1990, £10.95) (1st edn. published 1911). This includes 39 pages of introduction and 26 of appendices. As it comes from a press so particular about English grammar, it is not surprising to find a brief history of English and a section on the use of punctuation marks. It may surprise some that a dictionary of any sort should reach the bestseller list: the COD was number one in the general list of bestsellers in September 1990. At £10.95 it is exceptional value.

These works are all of the sort readers will buy for themselves. Another, in quite a different category, is the second edition of the Oxford English dictionary (prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 1989, £1,650.00). This massive work in 20 volumes is the printed version of the machine-readable version combining the original 12 volumes completed in 1928 with the subsequent supplementary volumes and further new words not previously incorporated. We need only repeat the publisher’s claim that it is ‘the largest and most comprehensive of all dictionaries in the English language’, and report that it has been awarded the McColvin Medal as an outstanding reference work (being described at the presentation ceremony as ‘the greatest databank of the English language’).

Philip Bradley is former Senior Librarian of Dundee College of Technology and Review Editor of The Indexer.

The Victorian indexer manqué

Tyrant or victim? A history of the British governess by Alice Renton (Weidenfeld, 1991) describes the efforts of young middle-class women a century ago to find suitably ladylike, remunerative employment. In 1898 they could buy a copy of the Women’s Institute’s newly published Dictionary of employments open to women, which claimed to indicate ‘every means of honourable livelihood at present open’ to them.

Of the 302 such occupations listed, 189 were manual, such as bacon-curing and doll-stuffing; 62 were ‘socially too demeaning’, including artificial-teeth maker and laundry inspectress; 20 required qualifications, special knowledge or long training; four required capital—to set up, for instance, as an art dealer or proprietor of a ‘cyclists’ rest’. Five desirable occupations had openings for only a few women—including magazine editors, and dealers in exotic birds. Another eight that passed the previous tests, including artificial-flower making, reading aloud, Deaconess and Bible Woman, paid too little—well under £100 a year.

‘The only possibilities remaining were to be a bookkeeper (£150), chaperon (£100+), general clerk (£80–£100), travelling companion (£100—), baby-farm inspec- tor (£150), schools Inspector (£300), writer of verses for cards (£200), teacher—or ‘an indexer for a publisher or newspaper (£125+’).

Most young women of the clergyman’s daughter category ended up as governesses.

Un-doctored indexes

Medical indexes are rarely mentioned by reviewers of medical books. Perhaps doctors take them for granted—or are unspeakably frustrated by them, and suffering in silence. But now, that worthy of worthies, the Oxford textbook of medicine, is available on CD-ROM (replacing its two-volume unwieldiness with the need for hardware) and its reviewer in the British Medical Journal (24 Feb. 1990) felt it important to mention the index.

No keywords; no retrieval—the computer’s requirements are merciless. Even ‘browsing mode’ requires the use of the hierarchial index. And in ‘search mode’ the indexes come into their full glory. There are separate supplementary indexes to the text, headings, authors, references—and how have they been constructed? ‘Each and every word of the Oxford textbook of medicine has been indexed, down to the many thousand occurrences of the indefinite article.’ Let searchers beware—they may be spared page-turning, but they must do the thinking ‘Provided careful attention is paid to the syntax, the construction of searches is straightforward and yields rapid results’ [italics ours],

The reviewer concludes that ‘this is undoubtedly the reference book of the future, and successors will surely follow’—are they all to be accompanied by uncoordinated concordances?

M.C.