The Wheatley Medal—thirty years old: past, present and future

Jill Ford

Reviews the history of the Wheatley Medal; describes its current criteria and procedure for selection of winners; and makes suggestions for its future administration and publicity.

Ten years ago L. Montague Harrod wrote an article in The Indexer entitled "The Wheatley Medal—twenty years old". He briefly surveyed the causes of bad indexing, and wondered to what extent the annual award of the Wheatley Medal for an outstanding index had influenced the standard of indexing. Now, ten years on, it is appropriate to pose the question again. By outlining the development of the Wheatley Medal procedures I would like to make some suggestions for improving its image and administration in the hope that raising the profile of the award will encourage indexers to submit their own (or others') work for consideration for the Medal.

Some attention is currently being given to the subject. Linda Fetters, the President of the American Society of Indexers, in response to a member's criticism, has examined the administration of the Wilson Award, while the Library Association (LA) is considering the future of the medals and awards it administers (which includes the Wheatley Medal). The Society of Indexers (SI) is represented on that committee.

Past

The Wheatley Medal was set up by the LA in 1961 with the assistance of SI in drawing up the conditions and criteria. It was named after Henry Benjamin Wheatley, DCL, FSA (1836–1917), the author of How to make an index, (1902), known as the father of British indexing and a noted bibliographer. This annual award was aimed principally at publishers who 'will tend to become increasingly aware of the importance of this essential part of a subject book'. Recommendations from members of SI and the LA were invited, the panel to consist of four members of SI and two of the LA. The winning indexer had to be British and the book to have been published in the UK in the preceding year. It was assumed that only back of book indexes would be submitted, and certain types of publication were excluded—technical books, yearbooks, serial publications and encyclopaedic works.

The criteria for the award of the Medal stated that the index had to be outstanding. Apart from the normal requirements of a good index, i.e. to be comprehensive and accurate, with good choice of key words and subheadings, etc.—a particular criterion was that the alphabetical arrangement should be in accordance with BS1749:1960.

For the first two years no awards were given, only two nominations being received for the 1962 Medal. The conditions for nomination were then revised and broadened to include 'printed indexes to any type of publication'.

Present

The conditions and criteria during the 30-year span of the Medal's existence have changed, and the current conditions are:

1. The printed index to any type of publication may be submitted, provided that the whole work, including the index, or the index alone, has originated in the United Kingdom.
2. Nominated indexes are to have been published in the previous three years.
3. Recommendations for the award are invited from members of SI and the LA, publishers, and others.
4. The panel is to consist of three members of SI and three of the LA Cataloguing and Indexing Group, with power to co-opt.

The acceptable standards of indexing techniques are spelled out in the special criteria for panel members to take into consideration.

1. Clarity of introduction note. (If no introductory note is provided, full marks may be awarded if it is shown to be unnecessary.)
2. Comprehensiveness of the index (within any limits explained in the introductory note).
3. Appropriate choice of terms used in the headings and subheadings; consistency in use of terms, reflecting the use of terms in the text where appropriate.
4. Accuracy of page references, with avoidance of strings of undifferentiated references.
5. The use of cross-references ('see' and 'see also') to connect related terms to those in current use, and
replacement of ‘see’ references with duplicate entries when economical to do so.

6. Accuracy of alphabetization and/or other order.

7. Layout and presentation of the index.

8. Overall impact of the index, taking into consideration the above factors and any original contributions to the technique of indexing.

**Procedures**

Usually about twenty nominations are received, mostly from publishers, some from indexers nominating other indexers’ work, and some from indexers nominating their own work (occasionally putting forward two or three of their own indexes). The work must have been published during the previous three years, and originated in the UK. (About ten per cent are found to be ineligible by failing on one or more of these points.)

Members of the panel have about a month to study the submitted indexes which have been collected from the publishers by the LA and are available for inspection in the library at the LA. Each index must be accompanied by the text. (Not such an obvious point—several nominations arrive textless!) Having carefully studied the nominated indexes and texts the panel meets, with all the publications available, deliberating and commenting on each one individually. A short list of five or six becomes apparent, and during discussion and closer examination of these, the six panelists taking up points and listening to arguments for and against, two or three indexes emerge as being exceptional. That is when the task of making decisions and committing your vote to one winner (or no outright winner) makes the difference between first place and lower placings. There is normally a winner, runner-up and one (or more) highly commended.

The selection meeting of the panel takes place in mid-June and the winners are then notified. No one else is told of the result until the public announcement in the form of an LA press release is made in September. The presentation of the Medal to the winner and certificates is held at a well attended ceremony in October or November.

That, briefly, is the procedure of finding a Wheatley Medal winner each year; it has not substantially changed for 30 years. It should be noted that a winning entry is not found every year.

Some additional points might be of interest: part of the panel changes each year, each member bringing different specialities and experience. There is no particular qualification for being on the panel, except that wide experience of indexing and of using indexes is important. The chairman is chosen in alternate years from SI and the LA, the secretary coming from the Library and Information Services Department of the LA. The panel has the power to co-opt, though this has not yet occurred. It would be necessary if unusually specialized works were presented and no one on the panel was qualified in that subject to make judgement on the quality of the indexes. The power would be used to appoint a specialist to report on a particular work to help the panel come to an informed decision.

The names of most of the indexers are known to the panel, although this does not seem to be significant, nor is it important if more than one person compiled the index, for team indexing is a realistic means of tackling large projects with the technology now available. For the 1991 AusSI medal, for instance, the judges noted that the contributions of numbers of other people in the planning and execution of the index to The Works of Charles Darwin was compiled by a team ofsubject specialists organized and supervised by Richard Raper. It is, after all, the index which is being recognized, and the role of indexer(s) and publisher is the means of achieving an outstanding index.

The physical form of the index allows for submissions on disks and by other means of electronic storage as well as the more common back-of-book form, as long as the text and the index are ‘published’ in the accepted sense. However, unless there are two screens available together it would be difficult for panellists to check the index against the text, for points of indexing techniques to be followed through, for browsing through the text and index together. A hard copy is still required. The use of indexing programs is acknowledged as a tool of the indexer in which alphabetization and other technical chores are taken care of and the panel is not informed whether one has been used or not, nor has that so far proved significant. It seems unlikely that a computer-generated index will ever win the Wheatley Medal, as the ‘art of indexing’ cannot be accommodated by this means.

The design, layout and general appearance of the index are important. The publisher’s input here can turn a very good index into an outstanding one by means of a helpful layout, and a typeface easy on the eye. Many winning indexers acknowledge the role of expert and understanding editors in creating an outstanding index. Their contribution is acknowledged by the presentation of certificates.

**Future**

I think it is acknowledged that the Wheatley Medal has a low profile among the indexing, library and publishing professions. Although winning indexers are properly awed at the honour signalled by their professional colleagues, few publishers of winning indexes know much about it, and they rarely use it in their advertising. Members of the LA seem to know little about medals and awards (Besterman, McCollvin, Robinson and Wheatley) and, regrettable, most members of SI do not bother to nominate works.

I suggest that the administration of the Wheatley Medal should be improved so that increased awareness of its importance would raise both the standards of indexing and the quality and number of indexes nominated.

First, I think that if the winner is a member of the SI he/she should be given a substantial cash award. The
money could be made available from the G. Norman Knight Fund, an appropriate source, for Norman Knight was a Medal winner in 1967, and at present the Fund is not being used. The medal is a handsome object, worthy of the honour, but a sum of money in addition would help focus members' thoughts on submitting suitable indexes; their own work or that of others. In the US, the H. W. Wilson Company Award for Excellence in Indexing (founded in 1978) is awarded annually in two parts: the first, awarded to the indexer(s), consists of $500 and a citation; the second, to the publisher, is a citation.4

Secondly, it would be helpful if a submission document were included with the nominated index, in which the indexer detailed the problems he/she found, what solutions were made, what role the publisher played (e.g. any restrictions or particular help), what technology was used and how it helped or hindered the process, and any information which could demonstrate why the index was thought outstanding. This would make the nominee examine the standards of the proposed nomination and eliminate frivolous or unworthy indexes before they reached the panel.

Thirdly, the publicity to the indexing, library and publishing worlds should be more professional. A request for nominations needs to be made in a more positive manner in the professional press. The list of nominated books could be made known in SL Newsletter, with the names of the indexers and publishers. The winning book and runners up should be fully described in The Indexer, in which their particular problems and solutions have shown how high their standards are and how professional their approach is to the business of indexing: for example, John Vickers in 1979, and Ann Hudson (Commended for 1989).7,8

If positive, modern publicity were given to the award, in the booktrade and library journals in particular, sponsorship might even be forthcoming to raise the profile of the award and gain public awareness of excellence in book indexing.

References
4. Ibid.

Jill Ford was editor of Indexers Available 1985-90; member of SI Council 1985-92; assessor of Wheatley Medal 1990-date.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Name the indexer?

Norman Knight, founder of the Society of Indexers, maintained with vigour that the name of the indexer should always appear at the head of his index. No doubt he was successful in ensuring this for the indexes he made, but, apart from the compilers of some indexes of special length and importance, the practice has not become prevalent. I did not find the indexer named in any of a selection of recently published books.

However, before seeing his name over an index, the indexer would wish to secure that the index was printed as supplied to the publisher. In my experience this was usually the case, but occasionally copy-editors felt impelled to make alterations. These were not always in accord with the typographical design of the index, and might even introduce error, as when my 'rat-borne disease' was changed to 'rat-born disease'. As time often did not allow the indexer to see a proof of the index, the possibility of change was a cause for anxiety (and for not wanting to be named) but given that an index is printed as supplied, do indexers want to be named? As G. V. Carey persuasively wrote in The Indexer Autumn 1966 5 (2), 78-80, indexers are 'servants of the world of letters', and as such indexers should rightly prefer to be inconspicuous.

M. D. ANDERSON
Cambridge