How the Society came to be formed

Volume 3, No. 3 of The Indexer, the spring 1962 issue, had 48 pages, edited by John Thornton. It opened with a Chairman's Address by G. Norman Knight, explaining 'in the sixth year of our existence... how the Society came to be formed'. After thirty years as a free-lance indexer while in the Civil Service, Knight 'did not know the name of a single other person who worked in this field'. He felt that an association was needed; wrote to the press; and 'the response was most gratifying. Letters came pouring in and several discreet luncheons at my club enabled me to find out which of my more distinguished correspondents would be willing to accept office in the projected Society'. An inaugural meeting was held in March 1957, 'when some sixty enthusiasts from all parts of the country (as well as one who had flown expressly all the way from Utrecht) assembled in the rooms of the National Book League'. SI was then formally constituted. Knight reviewed its progress since, confessing, 'I count it as one of the achievements of the Society to have removed the intense feeling of solitude in which the indexer (of books and journals, at any rate) used to work'.

His talk on this occasion being 'a hotch-potch of different topics', Knight went on to describe some ancient indexes he had examined in the North Room of the British Museum Reading Room, methods of indexing from unpaged galley proofs, and problems of copyright.

Controversy and competition

Neil Fisk gave a passionate defence of letter-by-letter alphabetization, which had been dismissed by the draft British Standard for Indexes; this was countered on the following page by G. V. Carey on behalf of word-by-word. The conditions for entries for the Wheatley Medal, unwarranted for the two years since its institution, were revised. 'Printed indexes to any type of publication' might now be submitted, rather than technical books, year books, serial publications, periodicals and encyclopaedic works being excluded, as originally. A splendidly worded new clause ordained: 'The index should include all headings that common sense would expect, and scholarship need, to find in an index'.

The index to Christian art

From page 97 to 119, including an inserted twelve-page section of photographic plates, ran 'The index to Christian art' by Anna C. Esmeijer and William S. Heckscher (he who had made the flight from Utrecht for the inaugural meeting of SI). This gave a detailed account of the compilation of the card index in the Department of Art and Archaeology of Princeton University, 'a centre of Christian medieval research that attracts visitors from all over Europe'. The index was described as 'encyclopaedic in its range and catholic in its readiness to admit nearly all the visible manifestations of the culture of the middle ages... constantly tested, questioned, corrected, amplified, weighed', as an example of 'the type of index that precedes the work-to-come or that may be an end in itself'. The inner core of the index was its unparalleled collection of photographs. The index listed 'Scenes, Figures, Objects and Nature in its manifold forms, Personifications of Abstract Concepts and symbolical meanings in general'. Yet Heckscher mused, 'There is, philosophically speaking, an aspect to indexing which we are apt to overlook,' and cited five griefs concerning limitations he perceived, including the lack of indication of 'the significance of rhetorical forms in the plastic arts'.

This article was described by John Thornton, when he retired from the editorship of The Indexer in 1965, as 'the most ambitious article we printed... The plates alone are worth the annual subscription, and illuminate the text, which repays very careful reading, and elucidates the skilful indexing of unusual material'. In 1969 Norman Knight also recalled this paper as 'perhaps the finest of all SI's discussion meeting talks... Beautifully illustrated, this can still be obtained in separate pamphlet form' (The Indexer 6 (4), 141).

'Indexing and cataloguing are entirely distinct arts'

Also in this issue, Lydia Vilenchuk described 'Indexing of bilingual directories published by the National Council for Research and Development, Israel' to publicize sources of scientific and technological information there. Correspondence debated 'One index, or more than one?'; GNK's pennyworth concluded, 'Multiple indexes must have been introduced by someone in imitation of the system of classification in use in library catalogues. But, although they have some rules in common, indexing and cataloguing are entirely distinct arts'. Obituaries included that of H. Robinson Shepperd, a free-lance editor 'so fond of indexing that he used to compile indexes for works that lacked them and present the result to libraries'. Book reviews included Robert Collison's Bibliographies, subject and national, and S. R. Ranganathan's Reference service. A page-long conundrum based on 'the ramifications of the hereditary peerage' appears as 'An exercise for indexers'. 'Personalia' included the information that Dr J. Edwin Holmstrom was SI's Corresponding Member for Austria.

THE INDEXER  Thirty years ago

H.K.B.