form, with entries varying from a few lines to several pages, it is also provided with a thematic contents page, so that the reader can start at any of twelve ‘key topics’ (e.g. Basic Facts About Computers, Choosing a Word Processor, Editors’ Assistance) and follow up a ‘trail’ of cross-references from those entries to others throughout the book. Information relevant to writers, editors, translators, and publishers is delivered in chunks short enough to be digested by the computer-dazed brain. In addition to general discussions of the technology, numerous specific practical tips for the writer (e.g. on word-counting, overcoming writer’s block, and health hazards) are provided.

As well as being an unrivalled compendium of otherwise scattered pieces of information, the book also provides prospective computer purchasers with a six-page checklist of the facilities that the best word processors can provide, and gives a list of ancillary software, with suppliers’ addresses. The list includes more familiar products, such as dictionary and thesaurus software and programs for producing bibliographies, concordances, and indexes; and also gives less well-known utilities, such as a copy-editing program, story generators, and poetry processors (the A–Z entry on ‘Poetry-processing’ includes a computer-written sonnet of peculiar quality).

Although the subtitle describes the book as a ‘Handbook of Terms’, this is contradicted by the preface’s disclaimer, ‘If standard computer jargon is unfamiliar, the reader should look for definitions elsewhere.’ (The short bibliography does not recommend any dictionaries of computing, however.) The book’s value as a computing glossary is therefore limited: although there are entries for ‘Filenames’ and ‘File Sizes’, the beginner’s very first problem—discovering what a file is and how to use it—is not addressed. There is an entry explaining ‘baud’, but no entry for ‘bit’ or ‘byte’. ‘Pop-up’ is included, but not ‘pull-down’. Notes on special keys such as Alt, Ctrl, Esc, and F1–F12 are not given under ‘Keyboard’, and neither that entry nor the index leads the reader from the concept ‘key’ to the entries ‘Command Keys’ and ‘Functions and Features’, where these keys are discussed. A separate A–Z overview of all the main entry headings and subheadings would make it easier to locate some of the book’s information, and a separate list of abbreviations and acronyms would make some of it clearer.

However, these are mere scratches on the face of a book that is an Everest of expertise and common sense and a landmark in confronting the technical and legal problems posed by computers in publishing.

Michael Robertson

Obituary

John Thornton
1913-1992

John Leonard Thornton died on 24 September last year at the age of seventy-nine. He might be remembered as a man of great modesty who achieved much for the Society of Indexers in addition to his career as a leading medical librarian.

He was a founder-member of the Society, and editor of The Indexer from 1959 to early 1964. He took over this responsibility after the third issue from Harold Smith, and five years later passed the thriving journal to Monty Harrod. An account of his editorial experience was published in The Indexer in 1965. He served as SI’s Vice-Chairman in 1967 and subsequently as a Vice-President. Indeed, his wise counsel during the latter years was always available if asked.

He played a major role in the Library Association as a medical librarian, and ultimately became librarian of the Medical college at St Bartholomew’s Hospital. An account of his achievements appears in the Library Association Record of January 1993. He wrote a number of books and was co-author of the history of St Bartholomew’s from 1123-1973. His wife died in 1982; during the latter years his health made him less active.

It was a privilege to have known him, and in conclusion it is fitting to quote his own words: ‘The Society must redouble its efforts to ensure that good indexes are provided, possibly by invoking the aid of all users, making the reader more index-conscious, but not forgetting the fact that the demand for more and better indexes can only be met by more—and better—indexers.’

Thank you, John, from all of us who survive you.


Richard Raper


Richard Raper