

Index makers of today



Haschers Fotografie

Michael Robertson

Michael Robertson was born and educated in Scotland, graduating there in English Studies. He first departed southwards to acquire a DPhil, again in English Studies, in York; then to the University of Augsburg for four years of research in historical lexicography and bibliography, and a further year in Germany compiling a dictionary of Anglicisms in contemporary German. After another year back in the UK engaged in linguistic and literary bibliography at Cambridge University Library, he returned to Germany to pursue his career permanently there, marrying a German teacher.

He worked first as a desk editor for Thieme English medical books in Stuttgart, setting up a group of freelance copy-editors and indexers and supervising their work. After some months editing *International Books in Print* in Munich, he cast off his shackles to become a fulltime freelance, based in Augsburg, offering all editorial services—translation, copy-editing, proofreading and indexing, with computer expertise acquired by several university courses.

Indexing was taken up as a necessary component of these services tendered, seen in Germany as a part of normal editorial duties. Michael learned the art by reading the standard texts (Anderson, Collison, Knight, *The Chicago manual* and *British Standards*), and by observing the work of the excellent freelance indexers he had overseen for Thieme's medical books—among them Brian Armitage, Laurence Errington, Jill Halliday and June Morrison. A third of his work now is indexing. He finds its appeal lies in the achievement of order—'a microcosm of its own that you can make completely tidy and logical—so unlike the real world'. Despite his original lexicographical and bibliographical expertise, his indexing

now is predominantly in medicine (*Reconstructive surgery in gynecology; Differential diagnosis in otorhinolaryngology; Endocrine imaging*). Having worked on so many medical books as desk editor, he finds 'the terminology gradually rubs off'.

Contrary to expectation, perhaps, Michael finds working in a non-English speaking, non-indexer recognizing country professionally advantageous. His German is fluent; few colleagues mean little competition; and he offers a service not otherwise found there. Offers of work are plentiful, sometimes excessive and passed on. He works via modem for publishers in many countries, including work turned round for Tokyo within twelve hours.

While most freelancers work in isolation, few are so geographically remote from their colleagues. The few other editors around are mostly short-term visitors from America and Canada. There is no professional organization in Germany for editors or indexers. Lacking fellow-professionals to hand, Michael takes care to belong to all appropriate organizations, to keep in touch and abreast of developments, and get to the source information. He is a member of the Society of Indexers, Society of Authors, Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders, European Association of Science Editors, and the Translators' Association (all based in London), and has spoken at two of their conferences. He subscribes to many literary newspapers and reviews as well as receiving and studying the publications of all those societies. He contributes substantially to them, too: his publications list is lengthy, and he has much impressed this editor by the immaculate presentation of his articles as well as their excellent content. One has been translated into Japanese and reproduced in *Shoshi Sakuin Tenbou*, the journal of the Japan Indexers Association—only the fourth article from *The Indexer* to be so honoured. Michael regularly reviews books and software for *The Indexer*, *Learned Publishing*, and the *SFEP Newsletter*, knowledgeably and stylishly.

Freelance indexers are heard to complain of solitude, of being handicapped by living far from London, and by lack of appreciation of their work by publishers and public. Dr Robertson's career counters the myths, thriving as he does as indexer of English books some hundreds of miles from English publishing centres, alone in a foreign field where English is not predominantly spoken and professional indexing not recognized. What circumstantial excuses to offer for failure—but instead they form a fascinating background for enterprising success.

H. K. B.



**Michèle
Clarke**

Michèle Clarke graduated from the University of Wales in Latin and Greek, and after a brief foray into teaching, worked for seven years as Librarian and Information Officer at scientific and architectural firms in Hertfordshire. She turned freelance in 1974, having been made redundant from her library and never quite happy to delegate and oversee the work of others, preferring to see a task all through herself.

Indexing and abstracting for pharmaceutical enterprises had come her way during her scientific library days, and she now looked to these, along with copy-editing and proofreading, for full-time work. Marking in the latest *Writers' & artists' yearbook* all the publishers in the various special fields in which she had acquired knowledge during her information work career, she began to apply to them in order. After a week she had written to all the selected publishers from A to M, and received three offers of work. Stopping the trawling to do the jobs, she entered a freelance career in which she clearly gave full satisfaction, as she received copious further commissions and has never written a letter seeking work since. She joined the Society of Indexers, attending any training courses held, and reading the acknowledged classic texts on indexing.

Michèle 'absolutely adores' indexing, relishing the moment when 'the fresh ms pops through the door', and appreciating the importance of the work—'text-books are useless without indexes'. She claims 'a pigeon-holed mind', looking back to a childhood game of sorting cards into her desk compartments. She became a Registered Indexer in 1976, and her index to *Principles and practice of medical genetics* was Highly Commended by the Wheatley Award Panel for 1990, described by the Chairman as 'extremely thorough, with exhaustive cross-referencing and plenty of guidance so the right terms are found easily... a very

pleasing index, which gives its users every confidence'. Other indexes of which Michèle is particularly proud are those to the Journal of Endocrinology's *Advances in Thomas Addison's disease*, and the cumulative index to eight years of the thrice-yearly journal, *European Science Editing*.

Working on medical texts now yields Michèle's main income, while her most joyful tasks are on books on gardening and cookery—her two hobbies. She finds the end of the year, when journal indexes are to be cumulated, particularly busy. Her practice is businesslike, working direct from highlighted text sternly onto computer with Microsoft word-processing sort, for the sake of greater speed and efficiency, though 'mourning the loss' of 5 × 3" cards. When payment for a large index was continually delayed by a stalling publisher she took them to the Small Claims Court, duly receiving her £500 in instalments after two years' negotiations.

Alongside indexing, Michèle has always also undertaken copyediting and proofreading. She completes some 50–60 commissions a year, about half each. She sees both types of work as requiring the same sort of personality and skills: 'pernickiness of mind', the love of order and of 'pulling a book into shape'; both entail close scrutiny of text—though in a different way to edit or to index it. She finds that switching from the one type of work to the other serves as a refreshing break.

Having found the Society of Indexers so supportive of its members and concerned for proper training and accreditation of freelancers, Michèle was eager to see similar help and regulation for the ever increasing numbers of freelance editors and proofreaders. In 1988 she helped her friend and colleague Norma Whitcombe to meet this need by founding the Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders—instigated in fact at a meeting held during the Society of Indexers' conference in Cheltenham. When Norma, SFEP's first Chairman, died prematurely in 1991, Michèle succeeded her, and is still Chairman of SFEP.

SFEP grew apace, with membership now of over a thousand. It publishes an annual directory and monthly newsletter, mounts regular training courses and an annual conference, and is moving towards establishing accreditation and registration. It remains in liaison with the Society of Indexers, with some overlap of membership.

Having herself turned freelance from a succession of information posts in institutions, Michèle has been instrumental in turning freelancing into a properly accredited and regulated way of practice.

H. K. B.