Index makers of today

Drusilla Calvert

Drusilla Calvert took her degree in Music and Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge, then a post-graduate Diploma at Library School. Deciding that skills suitable to practise at home would be a useful top-up, she attended the SI indexing course at Ealing in 1971, then followed the SI Supervision scheme. When her husband, Hilary, then a house officer at the Royal Free Hospital in London, knew that an indexer was needed for a conference Proceedings, who more suitable to compile it?

Drusilla indexed medical publications at home for some years, while continuing with her musical activities—playing and teaching the cello, working in music publishing—and working as a librarian, before bringing up three children.

Hilary’s profession is in medicine, but his hobby has always been electronics. Drusilla agreed to his buying his first computer, if he would write her an indexing program: so MACREX gradually came about, based on the rules of BS3700. Drusilla completed her last manual index the day after the birth of their youngest child, in April 1981, and her subsequent indexes were all compiled as guinea pigs for MACREX—entailing the need for constant cautious saving. Her work led to many MACREX features, while after the decision to market the program, its promotion came to take up about half of her working time.

Hilary is now Professor of Oncology at Newcastle University, so it falls to Drusilla to prepare documentation and advertising for MACREX, run a file-conversion service, run user workshops, demonstrations and training sessions, as well as a help-line for users called as much as six times a day. She does not grudge the free time thus spent discussing other people’s program and indexing problems; she enjoys the insight into how other indexers work, and revelation of the enormous complexity and diversity of indexing—she would deny the concept of any standard index. The calls also bring her a needed break from indexing, which she finds ‘totally absorbing—the hardest work I do’. Rather than the traditional break for a walk round the block, she finds the change to indexer-helper equally refreshing.

She greatly enjoys her indexing, finding the bringing together of scattered concepts, and encapsulation in brief phrases of what the text has taken pages to express, the most important and fascinating parts. Text may be so differently interpreted, and Drusilla tries to think mainly of the prospective user—what term would they look up? For whom is this book written?

The indexer’s relating of term to concept she regards as skill which could be used in other ways (such as thesaurus compilation) if indexing work dries up: she sees it as depending entirely on human skill, merely aided by computer-use. She acknowledges no such animal as automatic indexing: only human judgement can determine whether a term has sufficient emphasis to warrant indexing—contextual analysis may be irrelevant. Her work has included indexes to the BBC Summary of world broadcasts (sample), The fragile male for Boxtree, a Code of conduct for the bar, Enquire within upon everything, and books on jazz and on counselling. She especially enjoyed working on The Year’s Work in English Studies (vols. 63–8).

Hilary, meanwhile, still enjoys programming for some five–ten hours per week. Calls for consultation to Drusilla suggest new features and modifications for MACREX devised by him.

Within SI, Drusilla has served on Council, frequently speaks at members’ meetings and conferences, and advises members on computer hardware. On moving from London to Newcastle in 1992, the Calverts started a new regional Group of Indexers, and let a room of their London flat to serve as SI’s administrative office. In 1995 she returned to SI’s Council.

Drusilla’s name is associated for SI members with computer use and programs—but her activities and interests range far more widely, embracing music, travel (including undergraduate road-building with an International Brigade in Yugoslavia, a Cambridge University expedition to Iran to record folk music, librarianship in Uganda, and a simple pleasure-trip last year to the Arctic circle), English studies, indexing, and her family.
Frances, born in Lancashire, raised in Essex, graduated in geography from the University of Hull, and acquired postgraduate certificates in teaching and computer studies. She began her career as a teacher in Hertfordshire; spent two years as coordinator for a medical research project developing computer-generated reports; then worked as market research coordinator for a publisher in Sussex. At the conclusion of that project she was offered some indexing as a freelancer ("I remember being given one typewritten page of instructions and thirty minutes of guidance by the editor"). When her neurophysiologist/lecturer husband, Peter Lennie, was offered a Professorship at the University of Rochester, New York, they became a late ripple in Britain's brain drain, finally settling in the United States in 1982.

There Frances continued her freelance indexing, while bringing up her two children. Some of her clients continued to send her commissions, transatlantic. Much of the work of the Sussex publishers had been medical, and with this exposure to medical terminology, she made her special fields professional, college and medical texts.

As indexing projects increased in size and frequency, Frances found card-shuffling less and less appealing. "There has to be a better way of doing this!", the Lennies felt, and accordingly purchased a computer, then searched for suitable indexing software. They did not hear of MACREX, still available only in the UK; the Lennies found only two programs available in the US, neither satisfactory (nor surviving today). They were sure they could do better, and proceeded to prove it, devising CINDEX together over two years. Frances defined the rules of indexing to be translated into computer code, reading textbooks on the subject to back up her intuitive precepts by authority and explanation. Peter originally set up the system on Dbase, later recompiling the program in the C programming language, tailoring it to Frances's needs. C language for indexing—so, called CINDEX.

Finally realizing that they had a good thing on their hands, they sent prototypes to reviewers, who proved enthusiastic. CINDEX was launched in September, 1986, and a company, Indexing Research, set up to develop and market it, with office and staff run by Frances, who demonstrated the program to groups and societies of indexers, editors, publishers and librarians.

Today, as well as overseeing the continuing development of CINDEX, she is still a practising indexer ("essential to keep in touch with needs and trends"), working in a variety of formats—cumulated, revised, custom and spin-off indexes. She has indexed books ranging from research biochemistry treatises through clinical medical texts to a history of the Palestinian Intifada, and looks back with a particular fondness at her work on Hard at play, a history of recreational activities in the US—her first academic humanities index; and Implications of the blood-brain barrier and its manipulation, the first single work she indexed knowing that it would later be split into separate volumes.

Frances joined the American Society of Indexers soon after her arrival in the States, and has been an active member: a contributor to its newsletter, a platform speaker, a member of the jury panel for the Wilson Award for Indexing, and ASI's treasurer since 1991. While succeeding in the US as a business-like information technology expert and a stalwart ASI officer, she remains an English-born and bred indexer who can write sensitively of her art (in Key Words 2 (2), March/April 1994) 'I sometimes think that an indexer is like a portrait painter . . . hired because of your ability to create an index in your own personal style. . . . Rules are meant to be broken because we're not building an index to abide by the rules of the index. We are building an index to serve the reader.'