

# Looking back, looking forward

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A guest editorial celebrating nineteen volumes of *The Indexer*, and eighteen years of progress under the editorship of Hazel K. Bell.

The 20th volume of *The Indexer*, at the completion of which the journal will have spanned forty years, is a milestone at which we may rest for a short while to look back on what has been achieved and to look forward to the future. During the past four decades, a large number of small journals catering to specialized audiences have been started but not many of them survived and flourished as has *The Indexer*. It is still the only professional journal devoted entirely to the art and practice of indexing, subscribed to on five continents and read by thousands of practitioners, amateurs (in both senses of the word), and other people who are interested in the many facets of human communication: how it is generated, preserved for future use, and made retrievable—the last one being our special concern.

So let us look at what it was that has kept the journal going and what has sustained the interest of its readers. From its beginning in 1958 at a very modest scale, scarcely more than a newsletter (although proudly displaying a dedication from no less a person than the then British Prime Minister, Sir Harold Macmillan), it featured 564 main contributions up to and including the last issue of volume 19 in 1995. (This does not count the many small snippets, ‘fillers’ and other ephemera that make *The Indexer* such a delightful read.) The largest part of these articles, as is to be expected in a professional journal, more than 150 or about 27 per cent, was devoted to the practice of indexing. Of these, 43 (29%) dealt with the principles and practice of indexing, followed by 31 (21%) on issues pertaining to the (not always smooth) relations between indexers, authors and publishers, as well as such topics as (in A to Z order) aboutness, alphabetization, bias, evaluation, humor, legal aspects, training, and users. The second largest group of contributions, 100 or 18% of the total, was devoted to subject specialities, ranging from archeology through history, language, law and medicine to religion, science, technology and topography. Almost as much was written on the various types of indexing (91 articles, or 16%), from bibliographies and citation indexes to the indexing of photographs, films, poetry, hymns and psalms, with the indexing of newspapers, periodicals, and their cumulations being most numerous (51 articles or 56%). Biographies and literary figures attracted 54 contributions; countries and languages were the subject of 46 articles; information technology and its applications was treated in 37 writings; and various indexing systems, standards and practices were the topics of 34 articles. Archives and databases as well as bibliographies and reference works were the subjects of respectively 16 and 12 contributions, followed by topics such as the history of indexing, design and layout, and indexing services, each of which attracted less than ten articles.

*The Indexer* has thus presented its readers with well-balanced fare: not too heavy on the bolts and nuts of the business (an ever-lurking danger in a journal written by professionals for

professionals), but covering many different aspects of the art, and providing readers with sometimes unexpected insights or little-known details of the art of indexing as it is practiced on many different subjects, in a wide range of media from print to hypertext, and by variegated methods, some of which have emerged only recently yet have been taken up eagerly by indexers on which the outside world is otherwise apt to look as ‘harmless drudges’, like Dr. Johnson’s dictionary makers.

All this is to a large extent the result of the devotion, skill, and sheer energy of Hazel K. Bell who guided the fortunes of the journal for 18 years—the longest tenure of any of its editors—but who resigned her duties with the completion of volume 19. Many people seem to think that all a journal editor does is to sit back in an easy chair, waiting for manuscripts to accumulate on the desk, wielding a heavy blue pencil, and then to pick and choose among the articles for inclusion in the next issue, with an occasional phone call to the printer and distributor. When Hazel will write her memoirs (which we hope she will do one of these days, given her love of biography) we will learn otherwise: the chase after really good and interesting articles, the meeting of deadlines, the long and lonely hours, the inevitable drudgery of the job—but also the joy in seeing the next issue rolling off the presses, and the satisfaction of having done a good job. To such a memoir we are looking forward, but in the meantime, all readers of this journal will join me to wish Hazel well in her ‘retirement’, and they will hope to see her future contributions in the pages of *The Indexer*. This is also the place to thank Hazel for providing me with a ‘Classified list of main contents’, without which my little survey would not have been possible, or would at least have taken much more time and effort.

And now for the look into the future: what are we to expect from the next volumes of our journal? Inevitably, we will see more computer-oriented articles, but let us hope that there will also be those that will explore the limits of what machines can do and what the human mind must contribute to the art of indexing. No doubt we will continue to see more on techniques and methods of indexing, the bread and butter of the journal. Perhaps we should have more research into what users of indexes need and want, and what they actually do with our handiwork. We are still too much in the dark about users’ real needs, about their practices and habits (not to forget their foibles), and how to satisfy them as much as possible, given the limitations of time, space and the patience of editors and publishers. Let us also continue to have the occasional glimpses on indexes and indexing of the past, because that is one of the best ways to learn from our mistakes and to become better indexers. And by all means keep up the little pieces of humor, intended or not, to lighten the occasional drudgery of our jobs. May *The Indexer* continue towards its 50-year mark and beyond in the next century—vivat, crescat, floreat!