Index makers of today

Laurence Errington

Laurence Errington gave up an academic career in biomedical research after eleven years, and has worked since fulltime and exclusively as an indexer.

After taking a first degree in biological sciences in Sussex he moved 'temporarily' to Edinburgh in 1971 (where he is still to be found) to gain a PhD in molecular biology, and remained there conducting research in that subject, genetics, biochemistry and medicine. He co-authored more than twenty publications in journals with such catchy titles as, 'Cytoplasmic RNA sequences complementary to cloned chick delta-crystallin cDNA show size heterogeneity'. As funding issues became too dominant over both the direction of research and the lives of researchers, though, rather than seek yet another grant, and remain stratified in the hierarchy of departmental authority, he elected to be his own master.

Fate seemed to indicate indexing. A neighbour, too busy to index his latest medical book himself, asked Laurence to do it, telling him of the best indexing texts to learn from ('Knight etc.', then). Laurence's wife-to-be worked in medical books publishing and could offer valuable advice from that viewpoint as well as useful contacts. He had already bought a computer, from interest — a BBC.

Laurence applied successfully for a grant under the Enterprise Allowance Scheme, which paid about £40 a week to help set up new businesses; read up accountancy as well as indexing; borrowed a printer and 'somehow managed to format indexes in an IBM-compatible format on the BBC to send to publishers/printers'; and set up an office in the home.

Commissions flowed in. So much is published and needs indexing in the biomedical field, so that highly qualified indexers are sorely needed. For witness, we quote a letter from one grateful author of an anatomy text in restorative dentistry: 'the very technical nature of the text due to the small and specialized field covered usually leads to much confusion for those not familiar with it. The indexing of many of the standard works on the subject ... is of a very low standard for this reason'.

Laurence got faster and more expert; acquired an IBM-compatible PC; bought MACREX. Now, ten years later, he has compiled indexes to over 700 books, for almost all of the principal publishers in the biological and medical sciences, and regularly indexes 30 highly specialist journals each year. He is a member of SI, attending meetings of the Scottish group and making frequent contributions to the newsletter. He is particularly concerned with the business aspects of the profession.

Laurence works full-time every weekday in his home-office. Breaks can be spent in the on-the-spot company of wife and children, in place of enjoying 'the social interactions with co-workers that can help break up the day'. The downside for the family-home-worker is, 'there are times when I could do with more peace, and being at home makes you more immediately accountable for household obligations than if you were at least a telephone call's distance away'. Sharing the time for paid work/ household chores with his wife, now learning to be a piano-teacher, 'I often have to walk straight out of my daytime work into household duties, and sometimes envy those who have a short journey between home and workplace'. He is considering setting up a separate office, as freelances have reported doing in the Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders' and American Society of Indexers' newsletters. This would give more space, and, he thinks, 'might also help publishers to regard me more professionally than when they know I am a home worker, with the occasional attendant background family sounds'.

Laurence has mainly confined his indexing work to medicine and the biosciences, including among his larger volumes three successive editions of *Pharmacology* (H P Rang *et al*, 900 pages) and two of *Respiratory medicine* (R A L Brewis *et al*, 1600 pages).

He sees a prime factor in the mental pre-design of an index as 'publisher conversations — on budget limits, flexibility, whether the author is paying, etc.', and believes that one of the more difficult skills indexers must acquire is judging the length of index that each text needs: 'the art of indexing is an area that publishers may know little about, so it is up to us to determine how to provide a product of appropriate length and depth and *within budget*. It is crucial to get the balance right between quality of product and sufficient income. If you produce an index longer than publishers require then they may not have space for it, you may exceed the deadlines, and you must either charge more than the publisher wants to pay or compromise your rates of income. We cannot inflexibly adhere to advice on theoretical lengths recommended in various indexing texts'.

The chief danger Laurence sees at present for indexing is the increasing use of computers. What we all must do, both individually and collectively as Society members, he considers, is convince publishers that the indexing skills of human experts in their field will produce indexes sufficiently superior to those generated by machine to warrant the higher cost.

Hazel K Bell

Index makers of today

Linda Fetters took to indexing as she found it 'a catch-all sort of career' for her varied courses and interests. She first planned a career in music, playing the flute for 13 years through school and college, then to be a French teacher, finally attending library school; then found many ways to extend a career as freelance indexer into other aspects and projects of indexing.

In her first job, as a librarian at the Texas Medical Association, using indexes, she felt she would prefer 'to be on the other end — assigning the subject headings' rather than searching out the information. She went on to assigning MeSH headings to a collection of journals article reprints for the TMA, then took on indexing its journal, *Texas Medicine*, and the transactions of its governing body. She returned to library school to take an indexing course 'to make sure I wasn't missing anything important and to get more experience under supervision'.

Commissioned to cumulate a large quarterly index to the Texas Register, the first running to a hundred typed pages, she decided 'there was no way I was going to do that on a typewriter every quarter, so I bought a computer'. That was in 1981, in the early days of computers ('as exciting then as the Internet is today', says Linda), before indexing software came on the market. Linda therefore 'learned how to set up my own database management program, sort the index entries with a separate sorting utility, merge the data into a WordStar file, and edit the final product in WordStar'. The following year she reduced her fulltime library work to parttime and built up her own freelance indexing business, Fetters InfoManagement Co. To support herself until the home office was self-sufficient, she worked part time in the documentation department of the company where she had bought her computer, writing and producing technical manuals, and later teaching company personnel how to use WordStar and database management programs.

When a volunteer was wanted to write the 'Electronic Shoebox' column in the *ASI Newsletter*, Linda saw 'a great opportuity to indulge my interest in writing with my interest in computers and indexing'. She wrote this column of software reviews for ten years.

She continued with all these activities: writing computer manuals, indexing part-time, teaching indexing seminars, and consultation. In 1990 Linda gave up other work for indexing alone, as a home business. Occasional projects required work to be contracted out. To oversee the index to a 17-volume encyclopedia of physical sciences, for example, Linda chose some twenty indexers, combined their work, edited it, and typeset it herself with Ventura (612 pages).

The variety of indexing she undertakes is wide. It consists mainly of computer manuals and clinical medical works, such as a volume on clinical periodontology (700 pages), and five medical journals. She also indexes *JASIS, ONLINE, DATABASE* and *MultiMedia Schools*, as well as such 'soft' indexing as the five-volume *Journal of Thomas Moore*. She enjoys compiling

Linda Fetters

large indexes — more challenging as well as more financially rewarding, and requiring more organizational skills than a small project. She is a devotee of CINDEX.

Linda prefers to typeset her indexes herself and send them as camera-ready copy. She enjoys doing this as it gives more control over the whole process: 'You do everything from writing the original index through to the final edit, setting up the page size to meet specifications, making everything fit on the page ... I can control the quality of the index from beginning to end'. She uses the coding capability of Ventura Publisher.

In 1989 Linda and her husband began to deal with ASI administration, with Linda as corresponding secretary. Then her subsidiary company, DPMP, bid to run the Administrative Office that ASI decided to establish in 1992. In her four years as ASI's administrator she trained assistants to handle all ASI's membership enquiries and publication sales, and migrated many ASI functions to powerful software. She edited and produced ASI's publications, and has written two of her own: *A guide to indexing software* and *Handbook of indexing techniques*. 'Writing, editing and indexing are all closely related', she maintains, and she greatly enjoys all three.

Linda was ASI's President for 1992-93, through ASI's 25th anniversary conference.

How does Linda fit in so much? By working 7.30 am to 9 pm. There are daily breaks, though, for walking to see dolphins play in a nearby ship channel, exercising on a 'Health Rider' machine, and practising playing the piano.

Now, with indexing in all fields, writing and editing, software reviewing, typesetting, subcontracting, training and consultation all under her belt, Linda is going to set out across the USA in a travel trailer complete with mobile office. She plans to maintain contact with her clients and work four to six hours a day while exploring the US and Canada. Perhaps all there is left for her to try is indexing on the move.

Hazel K Bell