History of indexing societies: Part I
SI: the first ten years

Hazel K Bell

Describes the state of indexing in the UK before the inauguration of the Society of Indexers, and the first ten years' activities of the Society.

Sir: It is proposed to form a Society of Indexers. ... Its aims would include the following: (1) to improve the standard of book indexing and secure some measure of uniformity in indexing technique; (2) to provide a pool from which publishers and authors could draw experienced indexers; and (3) to communicate from time to time papers and notes on the subject. If any of your readers who are interested will kindly communicate with the undersigned Hon. Secretary pro tem at 4 Fitzroy Street, London, W.1 (Museum 3786), they will be sent particulars of the proposed Society.

Thus wrote G Norman Knight in the Times Literary Supplement of 28 December 1956. (Gilfred) Norman Knight, a former Barrister and civil servant, had been a freelance indexer for the previous thirty years, 'not acquainted with a single other person who worked in this field' (Knight 1958), and wrote to this weekly UK paper (how interesting a choice!) to reach out to others of his kind. In response, 'letters came pouring in', and after 'several discreet luncheons' at Knight's London club, the Society of Indexers (SI) was inaugurated at a meeting held in the National Book League in March 1957.

Indexing before Knight

There had been a precursor. The Index Society was founded in 1877 by Henry Benjamin Wheatley, a noted bibliographer and indexer (who edited and indexed, among many other works, the diaries of Samuel Pepys). He served as the Index Society's first secretary, and wrote the first modern textbook on indexing, How to make an index, E Stock, 1902. The aim of the Society was to provide indexes for historical, scientific and other important works that lacked them, and to compile bibliographies on various subjects. At the end of its first year it had some 170 members paying an annual fee of one guinea. They included the economist and logician William Stanley Jevons, and Sir George Grove, the historian and lexicographer of music. The Society's first publication was Wheatley's What is an index? in 1878, followed by the Complete concordance to the Holy Scriptures compiled by Alexander Cruden', first published in 1737.

The Indexer has noted many outstanding indexers of earlier years.

John Farrow suggests, 'the oldest index continuously in print is probably the Complete concordance to the Holy Scriptures compiled by Alexander Cruden', first published in 1737 (Farrow 1996).

Samuel Ayscough (1745-1804) was described as 'index-maker' in The Dictionary of national biography. He indexed the catalogue of manuscripts in the British Museum, published in 1782, and the 'remarkable persons and words made use of by Shakespeare' (1786), as well as long runs of periodicals and county histories (Anderson 1987).

Edward Gibbon's History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire appeared with delightful index in 1788 (Rawson 1995).

Percy Fitzgerald provided indexes to The Life of Samuel Johnson and The journal of a tour to the Hebrides, both by James Boswell, in 1900 (Bell 1982).

Cook and Wedderburn's index to Ruskin's works, published in 1912, was hailed as a masterpiece by James Thornton (Thorton 1967).

F A Pottle indexed the many volumes of James Boswell's papers in the 1930s (Batchelor 1984).

L F Powell's index to his six-volume revision of Boswell's Life of Johnson, published in 1950, won high acclaim (de Beer 1967).
Esmond de Beer indexed the diary of John Evelyn in 1955. We have recorded in our series, 'Index makers' and 'Indexes past' the indexing work of Samuel Ayscough, Hilaire Belloc, Samuel Butler, Thomas Carlyle, Georgette Heyer, and Samuel Pepys.

The production of indexes in the UK of course continued after the demise of The Index Society in 1890, though without a coordinating body. There were agencies. In 1892 the Englishwoman's Review (15 October) gave notice that Miss Nancie Baily had opened an office in London's Bedford Square 'which will undertake all kinds of indexing ... The need for a good index is universally recognized, but the difficulty of getting one made in time by a person who has studied indexing as an art is often insuperable'. Miss Baily had been indexer of Hansard's Parliamentary Debates from 1889-91, and her new office had 'already met with much success' (Englishwoman's Review 1892). In 1895 Mary Petherbridge, indexer of the records of the East India Company, the Drapers' Company, and The Ladies' Field, set up The Secretarial Bureau in London. This offered secretaries to provide many services, including the indexing of books, correspondence, newspapers and records. Petherbridge published The technique of indexing in 1904. The Bureau continued in existence until 1928 (Anderson 1970).

The publication of texts on indexing likewise continued. F H Collins published texts about indexing in 1896 and 1902 (Robertson 1993); Sir Edward Cook in 1918 (Robertson 1994). The selective bibliography printed in the second issue of The Indexer, 1956-7, ran to 116 pages. It included the final issue of the first volume, for Canada, Central and South Africa, India, Netherlands, Singapore and the US. The first volume of The Indexer, 1956-7, ran to 116 pages. It included the Constitution and Rules of the Society (four pages), the membership list at 31 January 1958, a two-page bibliography of books, pamphlets and periodical articles on indexing, minutes of Society AGMs, Council reports and balance sheets, along with articles on indexing practice, book reviews and letters. Systems of payment for indexing was the subject of much concern. Notices of members' engagements and marriages are also to be found in the second volume.

Society activities proliferated. A library was established and catalogued (by Robert Collison) and loans offered.

Professional colleague societies

Relations were established with other professional bodies. In 1958 both the Library Association (LA) and Aslib (then, the Association of Special Libraries) 'accepted an invitation to nominate a representative to serve on' SI's first Council (Knight 1963). (Both representations have been maintained ever since). The Council met on the premises of the LA (and again, has continued so to do). For its first 18 years, The Indexer was edited by librarians; its articles were abstracted in Library Science Abstracts. In 1961 SI collaborated with Aslib in staging a conference, and sent a representative to the LA regarding the IFLA conference (Knight 1960). In 1966 SI 'welcomed the formation of the Cataloguing and Indexing Group of the LA' (Raper 1966), and its January 1967 meeting was held jointly with that body. LA and SI united in judging the Wheatley Medal Award from 1960 on.

The Society of Authors declined affiliation with SI. The Publishers' Association joined SI as an Institutional Member, but no such liaison with publishers as with librarians appears. The lines of SI alliance were laid down early.

The comments by John Ainsworth Gordon, then Secretary of SI, on attendance at the inaugural meeting, were (Gordon 1979):

Four organizations of particular significance were represented at this birth. The National Book League provided the birthplace, and remains the Society's longest-standing friend and ally. Links with the past were preserved by the British Record Society, which had absorbed the old Index Society in 1890. Aslib enabled the Society to put down firm roots in the various fields of technological development which become increasingly important as time goes by. And the close links between indexers and librarians were endorsed by the Library Association, whose collaboration must count as one of the most potent factors in the Society's successful development.

The Panel

A Panel of 'competent and experienced indexers' was set up from which to offer names of indexers in response to enquiries from publishers. For admission to the Panel, applicants had to submit a complete list of books, periodicals or documents, etc., indexed ... and provide evidence in the form of books or other works for examination by one (or in doubtful cases more) of the members of the Panel Committee (Wallis 1972). In the first five years of SI's existence some 130 requests from publishers for recommendations for indexers were received (and only one complaint). The Report of Council for 1965-6 pleaded, 'The present members of the panel are taxed to their utmost and the admission to the Society of further experienced indexers would be extremely welcome'. The workings of the Panel were described in The Indexer by C R Raper (Raper 1967) and by Elizabeth Wallis (Wallis 1972).

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Training
SI’s first training course in indexing was held at the University of London School of Librarianship in spring 1958, with six lectures given at weekly intervals. The same pattern was followed for 1961, 1962 and 1965, with ten weekly evening lectures. In 1966 the lectures were concentrated into five days; the 1967 course extended to six, including specialist indexing, and attended by 35 students (Harrod 1972).

Development
SI frequently reviewed its own development. ‘The Society’s progress’ report in autumn 1962 opened, ‘Now well in the sixth year of its existence and with a membership of over 200, the Society of Indexers seems to have come to stay and to have justified the claim that it fulfills a public need’. Knight became Chairman at the AGM in 1962, and SI’s first President was appointed: Gordon V Carey. L M Harrod opened his first editorial with, ‘The year 1964 may prove an important one in the history of indexing because of two outstanding events which have taken place: the award of the Wheatley Medal and the publication of the British Standard on Indexing’ (Harrod 1964). President Carey addressed the AGM of 1964, stating, ‘This, the seventh year of our Society’s existence, is the right time for a reappraisal’. He severely cautioned members against ‘grandiose’ notions: ‘Aren’t we occasionally tempted to forget that our part on the literary stage, essential though it be, is not and never can be a star part? ... The aims of our Society are five in number. The first is: “To improve the standard of indexing”; fifth and last comes “To raise the status of indexers”. Let us firmly resolve to keep first things first.’(Carey 1966).

Indexing practice and types
Through the issues of The Indexer, the diversity of the ways of indexing was noted. Knight observed in 1963, ‘the majority of our members consists of indexers of books and journals, and we have perhaps tended to ... neglect the interests of documentary indexers’ (Knight 1963). This lack was addressed. In 1965 Harrod acknowledged, ‘The approaches to book indexing are almost as varied as the books themselves ... Variations in the construction and appearances of indexes are numerous’ (Harrod 1965); and the following year, ‘The science of indexing has numerous applications ... so vast is the field .. the complexity of activities which occupy those who call themselves indexers’ (Harrod 1966). J Edward Holmstrom distinguished between alphabetical indexing (‘an arbitrary but conventional order’) and systematic classification, and between the needs of readers of scientific and of narrative texts: ‘This difference in outlook and purpose ought to be reflected in differences between the types of indexing proper to “literary” and “scientific” works’ (Holmstrom 1965). EJ Coates likewise specified, ‘Scientific literature contains a greater number of concepts in toto and a far higher proportion of precisely defined concepts than does the literature of the humanities, so that ... scientific indexing looks at first glance formidable, but from the point of view of the battle between words and meanings, the scientific indexer gets off relatively lightly’ (Coates 1966). Clifford J Maloney distinguished between ‘indexes which provide clues to other documents’, calling these ‘external indexes’, and ‘indexes which provide clues to contents of the document (or set of documents) in which they appear — “internal indexes”, closed, limited, word-verified (Maloney 1966).

The coming of the computer
The development of technology affecting indexing through the succeeding years is mirrored in the journal. Collison suggested in 1961 that indexing was then in its Late Mediaeval era, ‘while the machine has been silently creeping up on us until it is now peering over our stooping shoulder’ (Collison 1961). In 1965 Robert Palmer wrote of ‘Electronic indexing’ as practised by IBM in the US (Palmer 1965). The following year saw Theodore C Hines contributing four pages on ‘A computer code for alphabetising’, and Jean M Perreault 19 pages on ‘Approaches to library filing by computer’. A Working Party on Filing Rules to ‘examine the differences that might occur between manual and computer-sorted filing systems’ was convened by the LA Cataloguing and Indexing Group, with SI representation (Richard Raper).

The Wheatley Medal
The Wheatley Award got off to protracted sticky beginnings. The Report of the Council for 1960-1 announced its institution, ‘as the outcome of a conference between SI’s Chairman and Hon. Gen. Secretary and officials of the LA’, to be judged by a committee of four SI and two LA members. But, ‘only two nominations were received for the LA’s award of a gold medal for an outstanding index of 1960’ — and both from the LA (Knight 1961). It was not awarded in the first year.

The conditions and criteria for the award were given in full on the first page of The Indexer for spring 1962. Only book indexes were to be eligible, ‘these to exclude technical books (other than non-specialist or popular ones), year books, serial publications, periodicals and encyclopaedic works’. However, ‘for the second year in succession, owing to the paucity of recommendations’, the Medal could not be awarded for 1961. The criteria were revised, allowing ‘printed indexes to any type of publication’ to be submitted, and printed in The Indexer for spring 1962.

Finally a winner was found, for 1962: Michael Maclagan, for the index to Clemency Canning, a biography of which he was himself the author, compiling his first index. According to SI’s lights, not an ideal first winner. Knight commented drily, ‘Let us hope that there will not evolve a rival body or splinter group, the Society of Author-Indexers!’ (Knight 1964). But it could well have happened. The winner for 1963 was again the author of the book in question: How to catch trout by J M Dickie. This winner commented, ‘I was eager to produce a good index for my own use ... not all the time being spent on the index as such, but quite a bit on amending the text itself’. For 1964, for the third time the Wheatley went to a book’s author (or in this case, transcriber, calendar and editor): Guy Parsloe for Wardens’ accounts of ... the Founders of the City of London. The conditions were further revised, now to allow only indexes compiled by individuals, not by corporate bodies.

The 1965 winner was Alison Quinn, indexer of Richard Hakluyt’s Principal Navigations of 1589. She was neither author nor editor of this work; but was the wife of the editor, and, she claimed, ‘there was some advantage in having editor and indexer under one roof ... it was quicker to ask a question than to look up a book ... for him there was no escape from my importunity’ (Quinn 1966). This index was later deemed by a reviewer of the first eight winners of the Wheatley, ‘the most exciting index in the list’ (Mullins 1972).

In 1967, the adjudication committee was once more ‘unable to award the Wheatley Medal for 1966 as none of the book indexes submitted reached a necessarily high standard’.
Standards

The Indexer shows much early concern with Standards. Council’s first Report states, ‘The desirability of drawing up an agreed Standard for Indexing was discussed and an approach was made to the British Standards Institution (BSI). The Institution agreed to set up a committee to consider the desirability of such a standard and the Chairman (A R Hewitt) and Vice-Chairman (James Thornton) were appointed as the Society’s representatives’. Thornton chaired the BSI Documentation Standards Committee revising BS 1749, Alphabetic arrangement, on which Knight and Harrod also sat. It comprised members from six bodies: Aslib, BSI, the LA, the Publishers’ Association, SI, and the Society of Authors. SI’s original representatives were succeeded by Collison and L E C Hughes, then Knight.

The committee sat for three years. A draft standard was circulated for comment, and at an SI meeting in November 1962 Thornton ‘opened a discussion of the draft B. S. for Indexes. The response was so enthusiastic that, in spite of the severe weather, the meeting had to be resumed on the following Thursday’. At this ‘special extra meeting’, Neil Fisk read a paper deploring the preference given in the draft Standard to word-by-word order over letter-by-letter: ‘This unqualified insistence is putting professionalism before utility’ (Fisk 1963). (His talk included a splendid early definition of a user, as well as a further differentiation of types of indexes required: ‘the man, less cultivated but no less worthy a citizen than his academic and literary cousins, who particularly in industry may very frequently have to refer to the indexes of scientific and technical books but is not and never can be familiar with the problems that face the indexer and the subtlety of some of his solutions.’) G V Carey riposted in the journal, ‘Mr Fisk makes a strong case for letter-by-letter alphabetization. I could do likewise for word-by-word’ (Carey 1963).

BS 3700, Recommendations for the preparation of indexes for books, periodicals and other publications was published in 1964 (at a cost of ten shillings), with index by Knight, for which he received commendation by the Wheatley Award Panel (Bancroft 1965). Surprisingly, The Indexer’s review, by its then Secretary, is less than a column long, with strictly modified rapture: ‘We must beware lest we judge indexes by BS 3700 and not by satisfying ourselves that they are proper keys to the text’ (Baker 1964).

As to other Standards: the second issue of The Indexer, September 1958, reproduced the six-page first draft of the American Standards Association’s Z39 Subcommittee on indexing. Council’s report for 1966-7 notes, ‘SI is actively represented on the BSI Documentation Standards Committee OC/20, and the Sub-Committee on Indexes and Alphabetical Arrangement OVC/20/2’. As noted above, SI also collaborated with the LA CIG in studying filing rules for manual and computer-sorted systems. The appearance of BS 3862, Recommendations for symbols for languages, geographical areas and authorities, was hailed in 1965, and BS 4148: Recommendations for the abbreviation of titles of periodicals in 1967.

Publications

The Society’s journal, The Indexer, appeared half-yearly, four issues making a volume. The first volume totalled 116 pages; the fifth, for 1966-7, had 208, with a circulation of 610, in the UK and overseas. Vacating the editorial chair after five years, John Thornton recounted the development of the journal (Thornton 1965). L M Harrod became its third editor, starting with vol. 4 no. 1, spring 1964 (and remained editor for 14 years). The fourth issue of each volume included an index: the first two by John Thornton, the third — fifth by Carey, Anderson, and F H C Tatham.

As well as acting as the Society’s newsletter through these first years, including parochial items, Secretary and Chairman’s reports, and membership lists, it published many solid articles on the theory and practice of indexing. Knight’s contributions were copious. Some splendid works now lie unjustly neglected: J Edwin Holmstrom’s ‘Some ideas on indexing’ in 1 (4), ‘Some procedures in indexing’ in 2 (1), and ‘The indexing of scientific books’ in 4 (4) (together totalling 28 pages); and ‘Fingerprint indexing’ (J W Godsell) in 4 (2), 23 pages, copiously illustrated.

In the first two items of an intended series, ‘Indexing masterpieces’, Esmond de Beer examined L F Powell’s index to his own six-volume revision of Boswell’s Life of Johnson (de Beer 1967), and James Thornton wrote of Cook and Wedderburn’s index to the works of John Ruskin (Thornton 1967). The journal’s first symposium, in the autumn 1965 issue, had 14 contributions, from indexers, printers and publishers, on the subject of page numbers.

In 1960 John Thornton’s ‘Standards for indexes to learned and scientific periodicals’ was preprinted from the autumn issue and distributed to editors and publishers, with the aid of a grant from the Association of College and Reference Libraries. The article described by Thornton as ‘the most ambitious we printed’, ‘The Index of Christian Art’ by Anna C Esmeijer and William S Hecksher, based on a paper read by Hecksher at which Knight called ‘perhaps the finest of all the Society’s discussion meeting talks’ (Knight 1969), 23 pages including nine plates, was reprinted from the spring 1963 issue and advertised as available at one shilling and sixpence a copy. Binding cases for The Indexer were available, and bound volumes in red cloth with gold lettering.

Another crucial text published during those ten years was Collison’s Indexing books (Benn 1962), greeted by Knight with, ‘Robert Collison has rapidly established himself as the foremost writer on indexing of the present day’ (Knight 1962).

Ten years on

The Annual General Meeting held in May 1967 marked the tenth anniversary of SI. The Report of the Council for 1966-7 noted a membership of 261, and over 100 members on its Panel for recommendations to publishers. After a talk by the President of the Library Association, ‘A reception was held — and voted a great social occasion’. Knight chose this time to retire as Chairman of the Society, and was unanimously elected a Vice-President (the President was James Thornton). He was succeeded as Chairman by Richard Bancroft, with John Shaftesley as Secretary and Margaret Anderson as Treasurer; other members of Council included Carey, Collison, Harrod, Hewitt, Raper and John Thornton. SI was ready to encounter the next decade, which would bring the affiliation of sister societies of indexers in Australia, Canada and the US. See our next.

References

History of indexing societies: Part I

Spafford, Peter (1968). The British Record Society — eighty years of an index. The Indexer 6 (1) Spring 1968, 19-23.

The following articles tracing the history of indexing have appeared in The Indexer:


INDEXING PAST AND FUTURE — DUBLIN CONFERENCE

Society of Indexers Conference 1997, Trinity College, Dublin, 5-7 September.

Bookings are flowing in for the first indexing conference to be held in Ireland, and space is still available. Once all bookings are paid in full, which should be by 1st May, participants will be sent a pack with relevant information, such as maps, etc. and an outline programme. The Conference pack will include details of places of historic interest that are open to visitors, in case early arrivals want to fill every moment with activity. Several of the people who have booked so far hope to stay in Ireland for several days, and some are being accompanied by family members (£28 B&B in Trinity College). Intending air travellers are once again advised to explore various airline options, not just Aer Lingus, as costs can vary considerably.

The theme of the Conference will be “Indexing Past and Future”, as it coincides with the fortieth anniversary of the Society’s foundation. Topics will include a look at the Society’s past. An international seminar, to be held on the Saturday, will look at the present state of indexing, and its future in the 21st century, in the light of the development of information technology. This seminar will include speakers from the publishing side as well as practising indexers and will be chaired by Michael Gill, President of Cle, the Irish Publishers’ Association. On Saturday night there will be a Gala Dinner, celebrating forty years of indexing, probably with a guest speaker and musical entertainment. Sunday morning will be given over to workshops, and there will be an hour or so of Society Business, before the Conference ends at 1 p.m.

This is probably where I should say, Cead Mile Failé in the traditional way. We certainly look forward to welcoming you all in September, and intend to make the first Irish Conference a memorable event.

Helen Litton, for the Conference Committee.