
John Gordon’s decision to become secretary of the Society of Indexers was a stroke of luck for us, and opened yet another window on the world for himself. In 1975 he was settling into retirement, living at Hendon in London with his wife Cecilia. Freda Wilkinson, then SI Treasurer, met them both at the local history society and realized that this man of energy would ideally fill the vacant post. Guided by Freda, Ken Bakewell and Elizabeth Wallis, John got his bearings, applied his dynamism and took off, hauling the Society with him out of its doldrums. Yet he could never in his previous life have dreamed of having a connection with indexing.

John Ainsworth Gordon was born in Sheffield in 1912: he went to the local primary and grammar schools and his youthful idealism turned him towards religion. For six years he trained at Kelham, the Anglican College in Nottinghamshire, hoping to become ordained, but as he matured he felt the priesthood was not for him. He declared himself an atheist later in life, but the training he received must have influenced him greatly, since during the Depression he worked for Toc H in London, caring for the homeless and living communally with them. By 1935 he was working with unemployed people in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He saw people as individuals, persons; he felt for the many in the inter-war years who not only needed physical help but moral support, and he was able to give it, just as he gave it to SI members who had problems both private and professional.

He married his first wife Mollie before the war and volunteered in 1940 for the army, going into the Ordnance Corps. John had no extraordinary war experiences, but he had two jokes about himself: one, that he spent the war at home shunting ammunition trucks about, and the other that he rose from private to major to his own surprise — “opinionated but should make a good officer” was the report after officer training. His best ‘wartime’ came in 1945-7 when he was with the RAOC in Germany helping to recreate the German railway system. John’s love of German language and culture, which began at school, lasted for the rest of his life — the music, the painting, the landscape itself, the Rhineland and Austria in particular.

John left the army in 1947, meeting violence after all in a severe car crash that scarred his face and head deeply. He took the ex-sericeman’s opportunity of university life, spending two years at Bede College, Durham University (English, history and theology) where he enjoyed amateur dramatics, editing the university newspaper, and correcting a few errors in the heraldry he saw about him (so like John!). A further year of teacher-training brought him yet another passion, education. Religious training, social work, schoolmastering, were for John all for one end: help and encouragement of people throughout life. He was particularly good with the slow learners in secondary schools, coaxing them along, with little mercy on the nuisances. One boy told him that the headmaster’s cane was better than “a verbal beating from old Gordon”. Teaching probably enhanced a biting quality in his mental style; members of SI Council would occasionally be aware of a certain grimness behind the professional address. His Yorkshire toughness and his idealism caused him to demand perfection in himself and the best from his peers, but it was always balanced by respect and support for their work.

In 1973 he retired from teaching. His first marriage had ended in divorce in 1961, though he had kept up a good relationship with his children, and he then married Cecilia, who is known to many SI members. John valued family life and was delighted when the children from both sides, and later the grandchildren, were friendly with one another.

So began the growth of another branch to his stem — the reorganization of SI and the genesis of many aspects that today we take for granted. The Indexer needed a new editor and, encouraged by John, a slightly nervous Hazel Bell volunteered, and took off, with the greatest success. John also started an information sheet which gradually turned into the Newsletter. His really big idea was Conferences and the first one took place in 1976, followed by an international conference in 1978: for the first time a very large number of indexers were able to meet for professional and private enjoyment. As the Affiliated Societies grew, the SI files show how much pleasure John felt in an active correspondence with them all, further enhanced by meeting their representatives at conferences.

By 1981 the indexing course handled by the Rapid Results College was being revised, a supervision scheme set up, and a working party on technology formed, all urged on by his strong feelings on the necessity of keeping indexing not only professional, but modern. John never had a computer himself but he knew a lot about the state of the art where indexing was concerned. He was not an indexer, but felt it his duty to learn the skill and its history from the Middle Ages to the present; he was always setting indexing exercises for himself and arguing knotty points with members, and with time he became a fair judge. What thrilled him particularly were the early indexes to medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and the indexing of images, as in the Index to Christian art, begun at Princeton by Erwin Panofsky and continued by William S. Heckscher, the one overseas founder-member of SI, who came to the first conference, and whose index to Camerarius’ commentary on Dürer’s Melencolia John reviewed at length in The Indexer.

John’s letters were highly individual, full of wit as well as ideas; he had a calligraphic hand and was an amateur of fountain pens. Hazel Bell recalls his letters: “The memory of John that I chiefly treasure is his use of language — eloquent, passionate, precise, consummately scholarly. His voluminous correspondence made
the most entertaining reading, as well as being always thorough and informative — and his contributions to The Indexer were a constant editorial joy”. Over the years he contributed about a dozen feature articles to The Indexer and many book reviews.

As an administrator he was excellent, regarding his voluntary work as full-time, and apart from summer holidays, he never stopped. Ken Bakewell, who was Chairman in the 70s, remembers both the pressures and the pleasures: “I thoroughly enjoyed working with John ... he was so enthusiastic and energetic that as a full-time lecturer with very much on my mind, it was sometimes hard to keep up with him ... Council meetings in those days were sometimes difficult, but at the end of them John and I would usually adjourn to the University Tavern (sometimes known as the ‘Indexer’s Arms’) and try to relax and laugh over a drink or two. We would then wind our way to his home in Hendon, where I would retire much later than was my custom after very pleasant conversation with John and Cecilia.”

In 1979 John gave up the Secretaryship to Cecil Robertson and became Chairman: they ran well together in harness, Cecil being as keen and as work-happy as John, and under their aegis Indexers Available was created. Cecil’s accidental death five years later was a great blow to him and for years afterwards he would talk of her with respect and affection. His appreciation of other SI workers and his realization, surprising to him and to us, that we were a ‘democratic co-operative’ without the usual chain of command, are to be found in his ‘Confessions of an ex-Secretary’ in The Indexer, October 1980. As Chairman he was absolutely determined to cover the agenda in the allotted time: for a while he tried out an electronic bleeper — so much time per item, scaled to its importance — but human foibles defeated it and Council would have its full say. By 1983 he was 71 and starting to tire a little — but not much! — and he gave up the Chair and was elected a Vice-President, a position he held for the next six years. At the beginning of this period he visited Australia with Cecilia and enjoyed meeting AusSI members on their own ground.

During the late 1980s he gave wholehearted but not uncritical support to innovations such as the introduction of Accredited Indexer status and the development of SI’s own training course. At his retirement from SI Council in 1989 John received the Carey Award (The Indexer, April 1990) which hung prominently in the hall at Alnwick; he prized it as the crown of fifteen years’ devotion to what he regarded as the most satisfying work of his life. This opinion of his, given all the other types of living that he experienced, is a great compliment to SI; those of us who knew him would not want one word of the Carey citation altered — it is all perfectly true.

John was 85 when he died, simply of old age, and Cecilia survives him, though she is now permanently in a nursing home. His son and daughter arranged for his remains to be cremated in Newcastle on 25 April 1998 and SI was represented at the ceremony by Drusilla Calvert and Elizabeth Cook. Let Ken Bakewell give the final word:

“The Society owes a real debt of gratitude to John for giving it new life during a very difficult period. It is probably not too much to say that, were it not for him, the Society might not exist today. I think he deserves to be bracketed with Norman Knight, and there could be no higher praise than that.”

Barbara Britton

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