The Indexer thirty-odd years ago

Hazel K Bell

Volume 16 of The Indexer ran through 1968–9, with a total of 192 pages.

Its first issue opened with an editorial by L. M. Harrod on the meaning and various aspects of ‘indexing’, proceeding from ‘the simple act of arranging words or phrases relating to objects, ideas or matter, in a logical sequence, is indexing’, to consider the problems involved, responsibility for unsatisfactory indexes, different types of index and techniques, and authors’ capability to index their books. He looked forward to ‘a stage where an approved standard may be determined by examination’.

Oliver Stallybrass proposed ‘An unusual method of making a book index’: the use of a thumb-indexed notebook. His two pages describing the advantages of this system were followed by comments of 15 UK contributors, including Margaret Anderson, G. V. Carey, Geoffrey Dixon, A. R. Hewitt, Geoffrey Jones, G. Norman Knight, A. B. Lyons, R. F. Pemberton, F. C. Tatham, and John L. Thornton; and Delight Ansley, Robert Palmer and R. Wellstood from the United States. Neil Fisk’s contribution included the acerbic: ‘I agree with Mr Stallybrass that “Nobody who is incapable of copying a three-figure number correctly should be making an index at all”, but I would add that nobody who leaves in the British Museum “a wodge of cards” containing the results of his professional work is fit to be out by himself’.

Knight, in a five-page article, traced the history of book indexing in Great Britain from its origins in medieval manuscripts to its culmination (in Knight’s eyes) in the award of the Wheatley Medal and first publication of the British Standard for indexing. Peter Spufford recounted the (then) 80 years’ history of the Index Society (founded by Henry Wheatley in 1878). Margaret Anderson described the index, claiming ‘the most obvious technical matter word by word ... it should not be used for technical or scientific texts or large reference works’.

The development of the alphabet was described by David Diringer in ‘The origins of the order of the letters’: ‘its pre- and proto-history’ as well as ‘from the end of the second millennium BC until today’, and the ‘inner working principle’, origins and order. Illustrations show ‘The development of the alphabet from the North-Semitic of c. 1000 BC to modern capitals’, and the Etruscan inscription on the Marsiliana Tablet.

Doreen Blake and Ruth Bowden wrote of their compilation of an index to celebrate the centenary of the Journal of Anatomy 1866–1966 (an index which was to be awarded the Wheatley Medal). They explained, ‘the nature of the journal, the changes in terminology and the size of the undertaking presented challenging problems ... through the hundred years there has been a striking change in the style of the contributions’, outlined the history of the journal, with consideration of terminology, zoological classifications, and subject headings, and described the preparation of the index (on 5-by-3-inch cards).

Marguerite Fischer recounted how she had catalogued a medical library using MeSH (Medical Subject Headings).

Much of this issue was devoted to the Wheatley Medal, its photograph appearing at the head of the announcement of the 1967 winner, the Society’s founder and Vice-President, Norman Knight, for the index to Winston S. Churchill ... volume 2, Young statesman, 1901–1919. Richard Bancroft, then SI Chairman, described the index, claiming ‘the most obvious characteristic of this index is consistent excellence’. E. V. Corbett’s presentation of Knight to the President of the Library Association, and Knight’s reply, are given in full. He stated: ‘I reckon this conferment as about the happiest happening of my life ... what, far beyond any personal gratification, makes me so delighted is that for the first time the medal has gone to a member of the Society of Indexers’. He recalled the medal’s sad history: ‘the first two years of its existence drew blanks, no award being made either owing to a dearth of nominations or fences’, shooting from the hip on the question of alphabetization systems for indexes. He declared the trend away from letter-by-letter towards word-by-word ‘demonstrably disastrous for technical and scientific work’. He criticized the conduct in the literature of this controversy: ‘discussions of the pros and cons of the two methods are as a rule conducted, on both sides, from the professional standpoint of the indexer, and the hapless book-reader who is the user of the index is not so much as mentioned by either of the parties’. The user of an index, he observes, ‘unless he is an indexer too, is not even aware that there are these two systematically different methods of ordering.’ Fisk’s trenchant six pages include much examination of compound terms in science and technology. He distinguishes between indexes to such dry texts and those to ‘memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and histories’, calling indexers of those soft texts ‘stout defenders of the word-by-word method’. However, he concludes: ‘Practical examples have been given to illustrate a serious disadvantage of indexing technical matter word by word ... it should not be used for technical or scientific texts or large reference works’.
because no entry was judged to be of sufficiently high standard. Then for three years in succession came a spate of author-indexers as the winners — a triumph of the amateur over the professional'.

The report of a joint meeting of SI and the Cataloguing and Indexing Group of the Library Association on ‘Criteria for awarding the Wheatley Medal’ occupied three pages. ‘Warm and lengthy discussion’ followed a reading of the ten criteria used by the panel. G. V. Speaight, a publisher, author and compiler of an index to his own book, said he took five years to do the research on his book, ‘so why should anyone be able to pick it up and find in five minutes what it took me five years to do? Let them bloody well find it themselves. We publishers think sometimes indexes have been put in for their own sake rather than to serve the book’.

Peter Lewis of the CIG suggested that the award held little interest for librarians, whose indexes ‘were different from book indexes, and were concerned with information from whatever source, relating them to the context from which they came, a larger context of the world and knowledge generally. The book index tended to be related to the author’s intentions, whereas the librarian’s tended to relate back to information generally. Librarians were not compilers primarily, but extractors of information.’

The autumn 1968 Indexer also included an account of the discussion following Mrs M. D. Law’s talk on indexing Chambers’ encyclopaedia printed in the previous issue. The AGM was reported, and the Report of the Council for 1967–68 given in full. This included the first establishment of SI’s Register, necessitating an amendment to the Constitution, which had been reported, and the Report of the Council for 1967–68 given in full. This included the first establishment of SI’s Register, necessitating an amendment to the Constitution, which had provided instead for the appointment of Fellows.

‘A word upon indexes’ is taken from The Indicator of 1865, written by Leigh Hunt. He begins: ‘Index-making has been held to be the driest as well as lowest species of writing. We shall not dispute the humbleness of it; but since we have had to make an index ourselves, we have discovered that the task need not be so very dry’, and quotes items from the indexes to the Tatler:

Tenderness and humanity inspired by the Muses, 256. No true greatness of mind without it ibid.

from Cotton’s Montaigne:

Joy, profound, has more severity than gaiety in it.

Monsters, are not so to God, 612

and Sandys’s Ovid:

Diana, no virgin, scoff at by Lucian, p. 55.

Following the comments in the previous issue on Oliver Stallybrass’s article on using thumb-indexed notebooks, in this issue, Stallybrass contributes a letter commenting in turn on those; or, as he put it, ‘The 15 glosses on my extended footnote to Collison have gladdened my heart — not least because I can now follow up my Collected Poem with a Variorum Edition of the Stallybrass System’. In particular he takes issue with ‘my most formidable critic’, Neil Fisk. The acerbic note of their individual controversy continues — ‘I looked at some of [his] more dogmatic assertions, and wondered if it might not be he who was due for retirement’. He finally points out: ‘there is clearly great divergence among indexers, both in precept and in practice’, many variants having been vigorously defended by participants in the symposium.

In the journal’s tailpiece Knight quoted an under-stamped letter from Northern Ireland, addressed only: CONFIDENTIAL/ TO SIR OR MADAM / SOCIETY OF INDEXERS:

DEAR? [sic] SIR OR MADAM WILL YOU SEND ME A LIST BOOKLET ON QUITE OBSCURE LEARNIT [sic] INDEX AS I AM A SORT OF WRITER AND IT IS TO KNOW VERBS, WITH VALUE A REPLY ON TO THIS 5 LINED REPLY IS A POINT TO ME SOON. YOUR [sic] TRUELY MR. JOHN H ...

The third issue, for spring 1969, was introduced by an exuberant guest Editorial by Norman Knight:

What has often been predicted has now come to pass. An American Society of Indexers has been set up. This is clearly the most important and vital event in the indexing world since the formation of the original society twelve years ago. The Society of Indexers can but feel sincerely flattered by this form of imitation. We welcome the initiative shown by the American indexers and applaud their enterprise.

Knight went on to consider the name adopted by the new society, and likely future relations between the two bodies:

It is a source of gratification to read that 90% of the members of the new society favour affiliation with the Society of Indexers. ... We can foresee nothing to prevent the two societies existing side by side in the utmost harmony, each mutually supporting the other.

The editorial welcome was followed by a report of the New York City meeting at which the American Society of Indexers was founded, 18 November 1968, under the chairmanship of Dr Theodore Hines. Robert J. Palmer, a US freelance indexer, had acted as liaison with the British Society, discussing with them such questions as ‘the possibility of dual membership in the two societies, and American support for The Indexer’. ‘What impressed Mr Palmer was the spirit of friendliness and cooperation shown by members of the British Society.’ SI then had 45 individual and 12 institutional overseas members, 31 and seven respectively in the US.


Articles on computers are beginning to proliferate in The Indexer. In this issue, E. J. Coates writes (five pages) on ‘computerised data processing for British Technology Index’ which ‘attempts to record articles from British technical journals within seven weeks of their original publication’. Each month’s issue of the index comprised 2000 to 2500 entries, plus 5000 to 6000 cross-references generated by the subject index headings attached to entries; this task, of producing cross-references, was assigned to the computer. Coates reports: ‘The adoption of the computer assistance led to a considerable rise in the productivity of the indexing staff. After four months computer-assisted operation, the former backlog of work had been eliminated.’

Helen Townley supplies six pages on ‘Computers and indexers’, distinguishing ‘the nature of indexing and the nature of computing’, and subject heading lists and classification codes. She reviews the development of attempts ‘to mechanize the indexing process’ through ten years, including Key Word in
Context (KWIC), permuted indexes and articulated indexes, and looking forward to auto-indexing: ‘I have little doubt that the time is approaching when technical papers now appearing in the periodical literature will be wholly computer-held, -indexed and -searched’.

Norman Knight lightens the tone with an article on A. P. Herbert’s humorous indexes to his own works: Bardot M.P. and other modern misleading cases, What a word, Independent member, The Thames, Sundials — old and new, Watch this space and More misleading cases. He offers copious examples of APH’s indexing; here are some entries quoted from the index to the last mentioned volume:

**EDUCATION, ELEMENTARY:**

distressing manners of many children who have enjoyed public, 29

*Held* — does not necessarily include reading, writing and arithmetic, 31

orchards stripped by beneficiaries of free public, 29

pleasing characteristics of children without, 28, 29

**INCOME:**

Christian treatment suggested due to earners of, 65, 169, 170

earnings of, wrongfully regarded as felony, 62

**INCOME TAX:**

derision of, lawful, 120

immmoral basis of, exposed, 121, 122, 168, 170

**MAGISTRATES:**

conscientious study of obscene literature by, 67

quiet pride of, in freedom from classical education

'OY!', USE OF: See Education

**REX:**

persistent litigation of, see pages 10, 26, 33, 65, 81, 88, 102, 109, 117, 125

M. D. (Margaret) Anderson writes on chapter headings, whether or not they should be indexed. Lindsay Verrier, SI’s Corresponding Member for Fiji, describes his own ‘unusual method of making a book index’. This includes the following explanations:

I then take a rather large plastic bowl, one of those kitchen bowls with a snap-on cover; and shut all the doors and windows ... I take a galley-sized piece of newsprint, torn from the large roll of 18-inch newsprint that is fixed on the wall, and run on to it two lines or strips of PVD adhesive from one of the standard dispensers. With tweezers the little strips can be picked up ... Our main enemies are hurricanes, housegirls and cocktail parties.

The Society’s Corresponding Member for the Far East, H. D. Talbot, reports having discovered on arrival in Hong Kong that ‘traditional Chinese scholarship and scholars are “Anti-indexes” on the whole. Indexes as an aid to scholarship are disliked and even in a gentle way derided.’ He and his wife had indexed a translation and commentary on a 16th-century Chinese Pharmacopoeia with seven indexes: Chinese, Japanese, a set for other Asian languages, clinical, chemical, and an index of botanical synonyms, ‘as well as a General Index’. A plaintive note follows: ‘Will our other Corresponding Members please note that we should much like to hear from them from time to time?’.

The Constitution and Rules of the Society of Indexers are printed in full, with the announcement of the establishment of the Register of Indexers (at a Special General Meeting in 1968), and the rules for its maintenance and administration. Letters consider alphabetization systems and time allowed for index provision. ‘Extracts and comments’ run to two pages. BSI’s work is reported.

Knight notes the response to Oliver Stallybrass’s professional work: ‘A plenitude of praise has descended upon the index to The collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell, 1920–50 (Secker & Warburg, 1968)’ (in fact four indexes, one per volume). High and profuse praise is quoted from the reviews of seven leading papers: ‘a superlative index’, Anthony Powell called it; ‘beautifully indexed’, said The Times; ‘exemplary’, said the TLS. Stallybrass had worked on the indexes ‘for six almost non-stop weeks’.

Richard Bancroft reviews *Training in indexing*, SI’s training course published in volume form by M.I.T. Press, edited by Knight: ‘the first publication in book form entirely on indexing by members of the society’. It contained papers by Robert Collison on the elements of book indexing; E.E.G.L. Searight on forms of personal and place names; Landridge on subject headings; James Thornton on the long literary index; Ferriday on periodical indexing; Edwin J. Holmstrom and E. J. Coates on scientific and technical indexing; John Thornton on medical indexing; A. R. Hewitt on legal indexing; Knight on editing indexes, preparing them for the press, and proof correction; Knight also indexed the volume.

The final issue of the volume opens with two obituaries: for SI President James C. Thornton, and John Whyllie, SI Corresponding Member from the US. Under the title, ‘Floreat Societas Indexerorum’, G. Norman Knight provided an eight-page record of the origins and development of SI, then 12 years old. Brenda White wrote of *Scottish Library Association News*; Paul Vesenyi of ‘Indexing in source’, an operation for periodical indexing to ‘designate the subject entry of its articles in the table of contents or in an easily accessible separate column. The subject entries should be the same as are used by the accredited indexing services’. P. Schuyler Miller wrote of compiling a bibliography to science fiction, under the misleading title ‘Indexing science fiction’.

Computers were making many more appearances in our pages. In this issue, John Drage wrote of ‘User preferences in technical indexes’, ‘comparing conventional and computer-produced indexes’ and Gerald Willey of ‘Computer technique application to the archives profession’. A column appeared on ‘Computerized data banks in science’. Norman Knight held no good opinion of them: after citing three computer errors (yes, only three — but deemed ‘ludicrous blunders’), he thundered: ‘It may be asked if an instrument that is capable of such egregious errors can be trusted to compile an index’.

The Constitution of the newly formed American Society of Indexers was printed in full — five pages in 17 sections. Reports of the AGMs of both ASI and SI appeared. The conditions for the Wheatley Medal award were printed in full.

There was a strong humorous content to this issue. An article by Alan Brien was reprinted from the *Sunday Times*: ‘Indexes — pleasures of, pitfalls in, regrettable absences of, penalty for failing to provide’. A delightful selection of entries from the index to Wyndham Lewis and Lee’s ‘Anthology of bad verse’, *The stuffed owl*, included:

Heaven, system of book-keeping in, 32; vogue of Mr Purcell’s music in, 37; unexpected grandeur of its architecture, 48; knowledge of languages useful in, ibid.; blasted, 188; haloes the
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only wear in, 216 (Dryden, Sheffield, Watts, E. B. Browning, Close)
Immortality, hope of, distinguishes man from silk-worm, 152 (Wordsworth)

Eight members contributed to a symposium, ‘Why I am an indexer’. [May I confess to having made there my own début in these pages?]
The first advertisement for an Indexer offprint appeared: for Esmeijer and Heckscher’s ‘The Index of Christian Art’, 23 pages including 9 plates, costing 1 shilling and 6 pence, from The Hon. Editor, The Indexer, c/o Barclays Bank Ltd., 1 Pall Mall East, London S.W.1.
The volume index, compiled by K. G. B. Bakewell, and appearing at the centre of the fourth issue, was of seven pages.

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Letter to the editor

Homograph arrangement

from Judy Batchelor, London
I have been interested by the discussions of homograph arrangement in the pages of The Indexer (by Michael Brackney and Geoff Dixon in Vol. 20 (2) in October 1996, and Simon Cauchi and Michael Brackney in Vol. 20 (4) in October 1997). My own preference is for ‘classified’ arrangements and (usually but not always) for letter-by-letter filing; so much for theory.

Simon Cauchi’s discussion-group were (a) publishing-literate and (b) consciously judging between two alternative orderings. It seems to me that ordinary users (as we all are at times) expect just to look something up and find it, with only a little more deliberation than is required by a background knowledge of the Roman alphabet; and that it is the indexer’s job to allow them to do so. If so, perhaps we must use theory only as a base for an essentially pragmatic construction.

We might also keep clear heads about those conventional commas: they are not all representing the same grammatical relationship, and our ordering should take account of that (e.g. ‘[Jack] London’ is not at all the same thing as ‘[the town of] London’; it is only the conventional inversion and comma that might make it appear so.) In the ‘London’ cases, in any but the simplest of indexes, one could offer the sort of glosses that one might use to distinguish seal (marine mammal) from seal (stamp). Why not:

London, Jack
London, William
London (UK capital city)
Central Diocese of University of
London Airport
London: an illustrated history
London, Midland and Scottish Railway

In a longer index, ‘London’ as a surname could also be appropriately glossed, with Jack, William et al. offered as if they were a special sort of subhead, perhaps after an old-fashioned ‘long dash’:

London (surname)
Jack
William

In a voluminous index, typography is frequently used to deal with such areas of uncertainty (perhaps small capitals for places, bold for personal names, italic for book-titles, roman for miscellaneous entries...). That approach deals well with what is really the core of the problem with which we started: different users ‘read’ indexes in different ways and we shall always need an ‘explanatory’ element – whether ordinal, typographical, or verbal – both for those expecting one thing and getting another and for those who are not sure what to expect.

There are many solutions to the problem; but any solution should surely be sought primarily by the use of imagination and insight with regard to the specific needs of the indexing task in question and of its users.

Indexing newspapers, magazines and other periodicals

Geraldine Beare

The latest in SI’s series of Occasional Papers on indexing is now available. An invaluable resource for librarians and archivists as well as indexers, it is full of useful — and often entertaining — examples. Please see the back cover for prices and how to obtain your copy.