Editorial: Looking back and looking ahead

Perhaps because of my technical background, I hesitate to add to the hype of a ‘new millennium’, which technology gurus say does not truly begin until 2001 and which evolutionists claim is based merely on an arbitrary man-made calendar. Nevertheless, I am delighted to be the Guest Editor for this issue of *The Indexer*, which takes a look at where we have been as professional indexers as well as a look toward the future of indexing.

Bella Hass Weinberg’s article on language issues and indexing, specifically French indexes, is a ‘must read’. It provides insightful perspectives that you will not find anywhere else. Her exhaustive research illuminates the contrasts between early examples of indexes in France and modern policies.

David Crystal’s article highlights the process of creating a book of quotations about language, which he and his wife compiled and indexed. Their approach to indexing and their solutions to special problems give us an overview of the thought process required for specialized indexes.

Alan Walker’s report on the Dalian Conference of the China Society of Indexers (CSI) is the next-best thing to being there. Considering that there are between 6000 and 8000 characters in the Chinese language, many of us westerners have wondered how Chinese indexers handle alphabetization and other indexing matters. Alan’s report, especially his discussion of the Pinyin letters, gives us a basic understanding.

Elizabeth Wallis and Cherry Lavell give us a glimpse into the vital role that indexing played in the code-breaking operations at Bletchley Park during the Second World War. I had not been aware of the link between wartime intelligence and indexing; however, it certainly seems to be a logical combination of skills, and I think you will find their article as fascinating as I did.

Charles Anderson’s article bridges the gap between the ‘looking back’ and ‘looking ahead’ perspectives on indexing software issues. With a quick jump forward in time, Seth Maislin discusses challenges inherent in applying indexing skills to online media and Peg Mauer discusses the advantages and disadvantages of embedded indexing strategies, as well as some useful tools. In considering the impact of technology on indexing, Jan Ross also discusses tools, and further explores the need for all of us to adapt to broader concepts of indexing technology.

For some of us, the challenge will be to develop better tools, while for others the challenge will be in learning how to use those tools to create indexes that allow readers and end users to access the information they need as quickly as possible. Regardless of the tools or technology used to create indexes and to make them accessible, I think you will agree that the real technology required to create usable indexes resides between our ears, not in any high-tech tool or software package.

Curiously, Hazel Bell’s article, ‘The Indexer thirty years ago’, also sheds some light on software issues. As I read Hazel’s article, an old (or, perhaps, not-so-old) saying came to mind: ‘The more things change, the more they remain the same’. Part 6 of Hazel’s series on the history of the societies highlights the development of technology as well as international relations from 1988 to 1991. No doubt many of you will see some familiar names as you read this installment.

Although Mary Piggott’s article transports us to another time, over a century ago, I think you will find that the issues concerning indexers then have much in common with the concerns of today’s professional indexers. It seems that the members of the early Index Society truly were ahead of their time.

And now . . . find a comfortable chair, and enjoy looking back, looking ahead, and looking around the globe with some of our foremost indexers.

Lori Lathrop, Guest Editor

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Whether you are a beginner just starting out in indexing or an experienced indexer wanting to expand your knowledge and horizons, whether you want to be at the cutting edge of new technological development or are just in need of a break in lovely surroundings with some great people, the Society of Indexers conference has something to offer you. Sessions are planned on a wide range of topics including trends in the publishing industry, picture libraries, newspaper indexing, health of the homeworker, email newsgroups, software development of context-based searches and intelligent searching, electronic indexing issues, workshops for active participation in a variety of topics and more. If that is not enough, there is free time for exploring the historic city of Cambridge, and some organized trips to see parts of Cambridge that might be missed by the casual sightseer.