The Indexer thirty years ago

Hazel K. Bell

The spring 1970 issue of The Indexer, Volume 7, No. 1, had 40 pages. It opened with a three-page obituary, by G. Norman Knight, of Gordon Carey, the Society of Indexers’ first president. This was followed by eight curious pages, ‘Infofair’, by I. Shamah, who according to the notes on contributors to this issue was ‘currently engaged on planning a computerized synthesis of philosophy’.

‘Infofair’s first three pages reported on the conference, ‘Management decision through information’, held at Imperial College, London, at which ‘talks were given by various top personalities from Industry and Government’. British Petroleum then had ‘some forty computers, of large to medium size’. Shamah is sceptical, though, about experts and computers. He proclaims:

Sometimes experts can differ greatly in their conclusions, and it is no use just taking an average between them, or between minimum and maximum, or following ‘form’, because as often as not, it is the outsider that wins the race . . . . I have often had a highly computerized conclusion presented to me, and my poor humble brain in a flash judged that it must be wrong, and it turned out that there was an error somewhere along the line.

He then reviews the accompanying exhibition at which 40 companies dealing with information retrieval and computer and data services were represented. His final section is devoted to ‘Some reflections on indexing, computers and information retrieval’. ‘The ultra-microfiche system, when perfected’ is regarded as particularly promising for the future. Shamah is sure that ‘a World Data Bank Centre will come’ for which ‘the compiling of the master index will require a master mind and genius. It must comprise the universe of knowledge’. He considers that there is ‘one institution which could carry out the above project’: the Post Office. The field of book indexing will shrink, though: ‘books as we know them today will be gradually phased out; few remaining books will require indexes’.

After this, Dorothy Law writes of indexing Chambers’ encyclopaedia; Philip Wright of James Thornton’s index to the Letters of Charles Dickens. Thornton had died while this index was in proof, as a special Publisher’s Note in the volume recorded, paying tribute to his contribution to the work. Thornton’s article ‘The long index’, in SI’s published symposium, Training in indexing, was based on this indexing task. J. Arthur Greenwood provides nearly three pages on the typography of indexes, as well as ruminations on alphabetization, punctuation for geographical places, and ‘an index to terminations’ for books on or of verse.

Norman Knight made many short contributions to this issue, including a note on obtaining a small copyright fee in addition to payment for indexing, in return for assigning copyright. He carefully explains, though:

The use of the original index in books published abroad rarely applies to translated books. This is because the whole of the alphabetical order will have to be upset, since (to take one example) the French for ‘horse-power’ would come under C for ‘cheval vapeur’, and so the foreign publisher would quite likely choose to start afresh with a new index.

Margaret Anderson, under the neutral title ‘Some personalities’, provides a detailed survey of the methods of indexing used in the 19th and early 20th centuries, scrutinizing the recorded practices of: Sherlock Holmes (yes! in 12 of Conan Doyle’s stories); the Fabian socialists, Sidney and Beatrice Webb; and Mary Petherbridge, who had set up The Secretarial Bureau in London in 1895. The secretaries she supplied, besides typing and ordinary secretarial work, ‘would catalogue libraries, make bibliographies, do research, and translate from and to all languages’; and index books correspondence, newspapers and records. Petherbridge’s account of the process of indexing, and its rates of pay, are quoted at length. These are three fascinating studies.

Notes appeared of a Special General Meeting of the American Society of Indexers, held ‘for the purpose of authorizing dues beyond 31 December, 1969’. The Board of Directors for ASI was chosen.

The 12th edition of the Chicago Manual of style, with its new 32-page section, ‘Indexes’, is reviewed by Knight, over nearly two pages. He grants that ‘it does contain a great number of useful hints and pertinent observations’, but is concerned ‘to point out a number of instances in which American practice (at any rate, as exemplified in Chicago) differs from that of this country’. Knight lists 11 of these, and concludes: ‘While the list is by no means complete, yet it should suffice to warn the aspiring indexer that he must not in every case be beguiled by the seductive wording and authoritative manner in which the Manual’s recommendations are couched’.

‘Society Information’ on the back cover of this issue showed the names of both the President and one Vice-President framed in black, following the deaths of James Thornton and Gordon Carey. The Society’s corresponding address was c/o Barclays Bank, 1 Pall Mall East, London S.W.1. Corresponding members were listed for six areas: Australia, Belgium, East Asia, Israel, Pakistan and the United States (this last having three corresponding members, including Robert Palmer and Robert Collison, then at University Research Library, Los Angeles).

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