Freda Wilkinson 1910–1999

The Society of Indexers lost one of its most valuable and unforgettable members on 26 November 1999 when Alfreda May Wilkinson (née Truman) died just two months before her 90th birthday. SI was represented at her funeral by Cherry Lavell, who gave one of several tributes offered by her friends;¹ and the Society has also made a donation to the National Trust in Freda’s name.

Freda was born in Lincoln on 23 January 1910 and always retained a strong affection for the city. Her mother died while Freda was in her teens, so Freda, as expected at the time, looked after her craftsman father, and was also close to her aunt’s family. After the Second World War, in her mid-thirties, she moved to London and worked for a consultancy, which must have widened her horizons. She shared a flat with a much younger woman, one Sylvia; their tastes in music being different, Freda characteristically arranged a compromise, Sylvia’s popular music one weekend, Freda’s classics the next. The friendship endured, Freda much later becoming godmother to Sylvia’s daughter. At some stage Freda was asked to run a little school for small children, but always stopped lessons when Tower Bridge opened so that they could all watch.

Freda had never wanted to be a homebody but in 1958, aged 48, she married James Wilkinson, settling into a large house in Hendon, in northwest London. James was much older but they shared many enthusiasms, including archaeology, natural sciences, Fabianism, and filling the house with books. It was probably when James became ill that Freda discovered her undoubted talent for indexing, which would enable her to work at home in the intervals of looking after James (who died in the late 1960s).

She joined the Society in January 1968 and her first index was to a popular work on fish and chips – what a good start! Another book was on Venice and its gondoliers, but she gravitated naturally towards archaeology, becoming one of its very best indexers. Her orderly mind also found a talent for accounts, and on becoming SI Treasurer in 1974 she set about transforming a rather homely system into proper double-entry bookkeeping, continuing until Barbara Britton took over in 1980. She was deeply engaged in fostering SI’s relationship with our affiliated societies, carefully balancing fairness to their members with the need to retain sound finances for SI. Another valuable, even vital task Freda performed for SI was to introduce John Gordon to us in the mid-1970s; in her new neighbour she recognized an outstanding administrator who could, and most certainly did, revitalize our then sagging Society. Ken Bakewell, then chairman of the Society, recalls many happy journeys to Hendon with John and Freda after Council meetings: the three would light-heartedly dissect sometimes difficult meetings, and John and Ken would delight in listening to stories about Freda’s cat. Moreover, Freda would sometimes provide lunch for Council members when they met at her house. In the meantime, Freda herself was becoming a valued assessor and examiner at both levels of the Society’s qualifications; she also sat on the Editorial Board of The Indexer.

Besides all this she was attending conferences (both archaeological and our own), touring Italy (she especially admired the Etruscan civilization’s equality between men and women), amassing books on a wide variety of subjects, enjoying Shakespeare, and quietly collecting an A-level in English – aged 64. Her keen interest in art took her to painting courses and art exhibitions, while her love of gardens and architecture led her to visit National Trust properties around the country. Her own garden was a constant delight to her and she treasured her greenhouse collection of orchids, gaining inspiration at Kew Gardens and elsewhere. She was one of the stalwarts of the formidably near-professional Hendon & District Archaeological Society and became extremely knowledgeable about prehistoric flint tools. Moreover, when one of her lodgers departed leaving his cooker in a state, she took it completely apart and had all 17 pieces on the floor to clean them...

She became an SI Vice-President in 1983, relinquishing the position in 1991 but still keeping the liveliest interest in the Society, devouring all our publications and requiring oral reports (including gossip) from anyone who could provide them. In the early 1990s she suffered a mysterious illness which led to arthritis; becoming steadily more incapacitated she had spells in hospital and then 24-hour carers in her own beloved home. Her mind remained as bright as ever and friends were always enthusiastically and hospitably welcomed, especially if they played Scrabble, at which her encyclopaedic mind made her hard to beat. Even when nearly blind and deaf she required to be kept firmly in touch with the news – politics and personalities alike.

There is no doubt that had she been born a couple of decades later and with better opportunities she could have made her mark as an academic – but then she might not have joined our Society! Freda was sparky, funny, and sharply analytical; but she was also self-effacing, being one of those apparently retiring people who draw people as if by a magnet. She never talked about herself unless closely questioned, and no one ever heard a word of complaint even at the worst points of her illness. She was completely honest (sometimes disconcertingly so – she did not like the proposals for revising SI’s Registration procedure!). She cared passionately for the Society’s advancement and
certainly made a strong contribution to it, for which she was made an Honorary Life Member. We are honoured to have had her among us.

Note

1 Fortunately many of the details recounted here (as well as many many more) were elicited by Freda’s cousin Tricia Nelson during hours of happy chats with Freda herself in the last years of her life. I am grateful to Tricia for permission to extract from the address she gave at the funeral. Further contributions have come from Mary Piggott, Barbara Britton, Ken Bakewell and Margaret Maher of the ‘Hendon Archaeologists’.

Cherry Lavell, retired indexer

Around the World

Christine Jacobs

China Society of Indexers

The China Society of Indexers (CSI) is now officially affiliated with the American Society of Indexers (ASI), the Association of Southern Africa Indexers and Bibliographers (ASAIB), the Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI), the Indexing and Abstracting Society of Canada (IASC/SCAD) and the Society of Indexers (SI). With permission from the Chinese Ministry of Culture, an official agreement was signed during CSI’s October conference in Dalian.

Conference successes

AusSI’s Second International Conference in Hobart, Tasmania, met with considerable success. It was attended by delegates from Australia, Britain, the United States and New Zealand, and covered a wide range of subjects including website, database, bibliographic, book and journal indexing. Included were presentations on the Australian publishing industry, on the difficulties of indexing to meet the needs of broad and narrow queries, and on the political problems of choosing indexing terms acceptable to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

For a more comprehensive report, check out the October issue of the AusSI newsletter on their website: http://www.aussi.org

Both the ASAIB and the CSI conferences took place in October. ‘Indexing for Africa: Past, Present, Future and a Little Y2K’ drew people to Johannesburg to hear presentations on a variety of subjects. Look for AusSI president Alan Walker’s report on the conference in China elsewhere in this issue of The Indexer (pp. 21–2).

Connecting electronically

Clearly, indexers love discussion lists. The opportunity to escape momentarily from what is for many of us a solitary calling, to enjoy the collegiality of ‘talking’ to others who do the same thing and are faced with the same problems, is very appealing.

Index-L is perhaps the best-known general-purpose list with participants from a number of countries. There are a number of others however. aliaIndexers is sponsored by the Australian Libraries and Information Association and Indexstudents focuses on the needs of beginner indexers everywhere, although it was started primarily to meet the needs of people enrolled in the USDA indexing course.

SI has just launched its members-only discussion list, SIDeline, in order to provide its members with a forum to discuss local issues and society matters. ASI has had a similar list in operation for a while, ASI-L, and at least one of its chapters has a local discussion list: INDEX-NW.

There are three lists devoted to indexing software information exchange – Cindex, Macrex and SKY Index. Windmail, based in Australia, is focused on web indexing discussions. Other specialized discussion lists are undoubtedly emerging as I write! For information on how to subscribe to any of the lists mentioned here, go to the ASI, AusSI and SI websites (see inside back cover for URLs).

Do you know what a WebRing is? Robin Hilp maintains a website that links a ‘ring’ of sites devoted to indexing. The Indexer’s WebRing will lead you to the websites of fellow indexers and you are encouraged to join and register your site so that people can find you more easily. Go to http://www.geocities.com/Athens/4537/indxr.html

Member services at ASI

ASI has hired an association management company to provide management and administrative support services. Drohan Management Group of Reston, Virginia, will handle such tasks as conference registration, the printing of Key Words and other ASI membership publications, as well as helping with conference organization (however, ASI monographs will continue to be published by Information Today, Inc.). The ASI offices moved on 1 February 2000 (see the inside back cover for the address).

Among its other services, ASI now offers members two plans for accessing legal and financial information – a Legal Access Plan suitable for general needs and a Small Business Legal Network Plan that is designed for small business owners. In exchange for a small monthly fee members have access to unlimited legal and financial telephone advice and discounted office visits.