The Indexer thirty years ago

Hazel K. Bell

The spring 1971 issue of The Indexer, Volume 7, No. 3, had 48 pages. It opened with a consideration of the coming computer, in a seven-page article, ‘Computer-organised display of subject information’ by Michael Lynch:

Work has been in progress at the Postgraduate School of Librarianship and Information Science, University of Sheffield, for some years past on a topic which has come to be known as the articulated subject index.

He concluded that while use of the computer could rationalize publication processes, operations on content are much less well understood. We cannot yet produce adequate abstracts by computer, nor can we analyse subject matter so as to assign subject headings at an acceptable level of performance.

In the next article, ‘The moving finger, or the future of indexing’, R. D. Gee, Development Librarian with IPC (New Enterprises) Ltd, ranged over the future of printing, computers and indexes to books and journals, for a full 12 pages. He seemed not over-eager about indexing, letting fall such mots as: ‘In a computer-bound world, the indexer may have something to offer of value’. He continued:

I feel that some books should not have indexes . . . a book can be structured so that it works without an index, and there are too many books that are badly structured; thus needing an index to sort out the mess. . . . Any trade and commercial directory worthy of the name is self-indexing. . . . An index implies that the book can be thrust together in any order. . . . I believe that every book should be closely analysed to decide whether an index is desired, or whether the author could structure his presentation more efficiently.

He further denigrates our craft, stating: ‘Too much book-indexing is soulless. Many indexers do not appear to have read the book in their charge’. Also, we learn from the report of the discussion that followed, that Gee ‘thought that, for the most part, the state of British abstracting was abysmal’, and ‘publishing in Britain is not an information-conscious industry; it is a selling industry’.

Liz Stalcup wrote on the role of the editor in the production of a good index, concluding: ‘No index is better than the editor’s standards of indexing’. ‘Post Office filing’ had the subtitle ‘The great directory row’, with Michael Gorman and Norman Knight each providing an attack on the newly adopted principles of alphabetization for telephone directories. M. D. Anderson provided practical advice on ‘Making an index to a specified length’. Bruce Harling, who edited this journal’s regular and very long-running feature ‘Extracts from reviews’ from 1970 to 1978, provided a discussion of ‘Indexers and reviewers’. Microfiche was introduced.

Under the heading ‘Book indexing: a seasonal occupation?’ was included a member’s tabulation of the number of books she had indexed over a five-year period. Totals per month (January to December) were 4, 6, 3, 5, 8, 9, 8, 5, 1, 2, 3, 3, showing a consistent peak in the summer and trough in autumn.

Norman Knight, then President of SI, made no fewer than ten attributed contributions to this issue. As well as his charge upon the Post Office in ‘The great directory row’, he attacked them further in ‘Extracts and comments’. He also supplied a joke about Poet’s day (‘Push Off Early, Tomorrow’s Saturday’); quotes about indexes from Rebecca West and Nigel Dennis; comments on the headings of Punch, punctuation (colons preferred to commas), the reputed lack of indexes in France, the origin of the hackneyed quotation, ‘Best, Mr Justice, his great mind’; and a letter he had sent to The Sunday Telegraph that had been printed there with passages omitted. The President’s letter then appeared in full in The Indexer, with the passages that had been cut given in square brackets. ‘In the opinion of its writer, their deletion robs the letter of half its force’, Knight insisted. His subject was the lack of separate volume indexes to works published in sets of volumes for which a cumulated index is to be provided upon completion of publication. He cited in support the publication of the first two volumes of J. L. Garvin’s life of Joseph Chamberlain (Macmillan) in 1932–3, to which no index was available until Julian Amery completed the sixth volume, Mr Garvin having died in 1947, 36 years later.

Hazel K. Bell is a freelance indexer and was editor of The Indexer from 1978 to 1995. Email: hkbell@dial.pipex.com