The Indexer thirty years ago

Hazel K. Bell

The autumn 1971 issue of The Indexer, Volume 7, No. 4, was a bumper edition (for that volume) of 68 pages, including two long articles of historic interest to our societies, as well as opening prominently with:

A Message from the Chairman
PROPOSED AFFILIATION OF
THE SOCIETY OF INDEXERS
AND
THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF INDEXERS

Chairman Richard Bancroft reported the ‘discussions between your Council and the committee of the American Society on what terms of affiliation to recommend to the respective societies’, and the draft form of agreement that had been accepted by the American Society at its AGM was circulated with the issue, to be discussed at the next AGM of the Society of Indexers (SI).

L. M. Harrod, editor of The Indexer since 1964, wrote seven pages on performing that office – ‘The editor speaks’. His editorial duties included: receiving and considering articles, sometimes commissioning them, obtaining permission for reprints, copy-editing and checking, settling house style, adapting press releases for publication, reading other periodicals for extracts to quote, sending to publishers and reviewers their reprinted comments on indexes, compiling ‘Our Contributors’ and ‘Personalia’ columns, dealing with the printer, providing ‘fillers’, sending proofs to authors and to members of the Editorial Board, and collating and dealing with all their corrections/revisions (Harrod paid particular tribute to the conscientious proof-reading skills of Gordon Carey). Harrod himself sent copies of the journal to contributors, to the publishers of books reviewed and of books whose reviews were quoted, and to organizations that had sent press releases. He also dealt with the correspondence generated by the journal: ‘Examination of my postage book shows that I posted about 350 letters last year and made about fifty phone calls on matters relating to The Indexer alone’. He seems also to have dealt with the supply of back copies, and determined the print order for each issue.

Harrod recounted his ‘most troublesome problem’ as having been when

. . . type was being set from copy made by an electrostatic process. The typesetter had to wipe the page with his handkerchief for some reason, and as the handkerchief moved quickly across the page, so the image disappeared. All that was left was my ink corrections to what was not there!

Another copy could not be obtained until the deputy editor returned from a three-week holiday.

Harrod was happy to report that over 1200 copies of the spring 1971 issue were distributed, 700 abroad. The Indexer was distributed to 14 Commonwealth and 29 foreign countries, with weekly requests received for back numbers.

Bruce Harling provided a five-page, sectionized compilation of Indexer readers’ suggestions of ‘reference books which they found useful’. Oliver Stallybrass gave a 13-page report of a survey he had conducted among 24 publishers, followed by a one-page report of discussion of his paper, read at an SI meeting, and a two-and-a-half-page reproduction of his original questionnaire. The survey covered categories of books for which indexes were deemed necessary; publishers’ instructions to indexers; authors as indexers; scheduling; the impossibility ‘for an indexer – or anybody else – to estimate with any accuracy the cost of his labours on a book which he hasn’t even seen ... it may be harder to estimate the cost of an index than of the Sydney Opera House’; cost-accountancy systems; methods of and responsibility for payment for indexes; the assessment of indexes and indexers; the difficulty of time-keeping (‘Even if one is celibate, which I am not, the gas man cometh, the cleaner cometh, and the phone it ringeth all the day. One needs a pair of chess-clocks’); proof-reading the index; and the still vexed question of copyright in indexes. The report of the discussion following his talk throws interesting light on indexing practice of the period: ‘Miss Coole considered that indexers should not be expected to type their entries, for many of the older indexers were not able to type’.

‘Naming the indexer’ is considered, with pros and cons recognized. The seasonal aspects of indexing are reconsidered. An article on micropublishing was reprinted from the Newsletter of the Institute of Journalists.

An article by the very H. B. Wheatley is reprinted from the ninth edition of The Encyclopaedia Britannica, volume XII, 1881 – ‘Index’. Referring to the index to ‘the 2nd edition of the Hon. Charles Boyle’s attack upon Bentley’s Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris, 1698’, he observes: ‘Indexes have sometimes been used as vehicles of satire, and the witty Dr William King was the first to use them as a method of attack’.

The first Wheatley Medal to be awarded under the revised conditions, which had led to 13 indexes being submitted for 1970, went to a separately published index, E. L. C. Mullins’s Guide to the historical and archaeological publications of societies in England and Wales 1901–1933.

SI Council’s Report for 1970–1 showed SI membership of 333, with 112 Registered Indexers. A leaflet on fees for indexing had been prepared. Council had been considering the institution of an Award in memory of G. V. Carey, but was anxious to avoid its competing with the Wheatley Medal. The three possibilities were an award for services to indexing, for an outstanding body of work, or for indexing in the scientific field. Council authorized regular purchases to
be made for the Society’s Library, up to £10 (yes, ten whole pounds) per year.

Names and addresses of officers, directors and other committee chairmen of the American Society of Indexers are listed: ASI President was John Fall, Vice-President Barbara Preschel.

‘Extracts from reviews’ ran to 14 pages in that issue, still the province of the journal editor himself. ‘Book reviews’ includes a review by Harrod of Margaret D. Anderson’s The librarians’ glossary from 1978 to 1995. Email: hkbell@dial.pipex.com Hazel K. Bell is a freelance indexer and was editor of The Indexer from 1978 to 1995.

The third edition of Harrod’s own Making an index of terms used in librarianship and the book crafts, and reference book – 748 pages – was reviewed by Harrod’s predecessor as Indexer editor, John Thornton, as a vade mecum for the librarian, bibliographer, and all interested in trades and professions associated with book production; . . . indexers should have direct access to it as an essential reference tool . . . he is to be congratulated on this major revision resulting from extensive labour over a number of years.

Where, among all the multifarious tasks of editing The Indexer, did Harrod find the time?)

The nine-page index to the 208-page volume 7 of The Indexer was compiled by Wing Commander Roger F. Pemberton, who commented that the work had afforded him ‘peculiar pleasure. It is nice to be allowed to make a really comprehensive index without restriction of space by publishers’ editors “breathing down one’s neck”.’

An indexer in Flytopia

Jonathan Priestley, the hero of Will Self’s short story ‘Flytopia’ in his collection Tough, tough toys for tough, tough boys (Bloomsbury, 1998), is ‘an indexer by profession’, living with his partner Joy in a small Suffolk town identified as ‘Inwardleigh’. We meet him returning to his cottage from a shopping trip. Joy has been away for two days and, in the stifling summer heat, he is distracted from his work by the buzzing and whining of invading insects.

Jonathan was compiling the index for a scholarly work on ecclesiastical architecture – or meant to be. Normally the whirrings and clickings of the Macintosh soothed him, as he moved from application to application, working in symbiosis with the mechanism. But now he found himself listening the whole time, listening for the other whirrs and clicks of his fellow residents. It occurred to him that perhaps they were learning to imitate the noises of the computer; that through some quantum, phylogenetic leap, the insects were becoming computer-like.

It must be said that Jonathan’s indexing methods are somewhat unusual. He appears to be using some kind of word-search function.

In Joy’s absence, Jonathan is powerless to combat the insects. The following morning, after a Kafkaesque nightmare in which Joy is transformed into a giant insect, he awakes to find himself living in ‘Flytopia’. The insects – flies, wasps, silverfish, ants, dust-mites and earwigs – start to communicate with him, and he agrees to a pact. They will live in peace together; he will allow them to live, and in return they will serve him, not only cleaning the house but accommodating his needs in various other ways. They even start to help him with his work on the index.

Whenever Jonathan needed something, a pencil or a computer disk, he had only to point to it for an insect formation to arrange itself in the air, lift the required object, and port it to where he sat, laboured at the Macintosh . . . . progress on the index was effortless. He was on to ‘rood’ by the end of the morning.

Next day, he finds that the insects’ skills have developed even further.

One particularly faithful fly proved the most adept of wordfinders, shuffling over the open spread of the OED until it found the correct entry, and then squatting there, gently agitating its wings, so as to act as a living cursor . . . . Jonathan was so engrossed in his index that he didn’t hear the squeal of brakes as Joy’s cab pulled up outside the cottage.

What happens on Joy’s return is best not revealed here, but we assume that the index compiled in so unorthodox a manner is eventually completed to the client’s satisfaction, with the help of Jonathan’s humble assistants, the inhabitants of Flytopia.

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