Skirting the issue?

Tom Norton's delightful tale of personally serendipitous indexing ('Indexing my life', The Indexer 22(4), October 2001, pp. 173–4) includes a charming conjecture on the reason why little boys were once dressed in skirts. Mr Norton presents as a possible explanation the reluctance of fairies to serve as angels of death for little girls (or little boys who looked like girls). A letter to the editor in the Q&A column of *Country Life* magazine suggested that the reason was the more mundane one of protection against the kidnapping of little boys for ransom (which apparently was a 19th-century problem amongst the monied classes). I offered an alternative illustrated view, which was published in the issue of *Country Life* for 3 February 2000, where I reported that the custom of putting little boys in dresses was alive and well in the United States early in the last century. I included with my letter a scan of an old photograph of my mother’s younger brother at about age two in 1910 (see Fig. 1). Not only is his dress clearly visible, but he is wearing an oddly feminine coat as well. When I asked my mother about the photograph, she recalled merely that it was the custom of the time in Boston, Massachusetts, where she lived as a child.

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The Indexer thirty years ago

Hazel K. Bell

The *April 1972* issue of The Indexer, Volume 8, No. 1, was the first to proclaim on its cover, 'Journal of THE SOCIETY OF INDEXERS and of THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF INDEXERS'. Norman Knight opened the issue with 'A message from the President':

Mark well the number of this issue of The Indexer. It is No. 1 of Volume 8 of the Journal of the Society of Indexers. But it is also the first number to be published as the official organ of both the Society of Indexers and the American Society of Indexers.

This felicitous development follows the affiliation of the American Society, which was founded in 1968, with its British predecessor.

The 12 terms of affiliation, 'primarily the handiwork of Mr A. R. Hewitt', the first Chairman of the Society of Indexers (SI), were printed in full in this issue. Territories were clearly delineated:

8. The American Society shall refrain from soliciting new membership in the United Kingdom and countries of the Commonwealth, except Canada. The Society shall refrain from soliciting new membership in the United States of America and its dependencies and Canada.

Regarding *The Indexer*:

9. The appointment of the Editor and Editorial Board of The Indexer shall remain the prerogative of the Society. The American Society shall appoint one corresponding member of the Editorial Board who shall be responsible for submitting the American Society’s contributions to the Editor. [The first was Jessica Harris.]

The first AGM of the American Society of Indexers (ASI), with the election of its officers and directors, was reported. Their first President was John Fall, Chairman of the Public Affairs Information Service.

1972 was International Book Year, which *The Indexer* recognized by making this 'an enlarged number' of 80 pages with a 20-page illustrations section. It included surveys of the state of indexing in various countries: Australia ('Room for improvement in Australia' by H. Godfrey Green); Israel (by M. Z. Barkai); Southern Africa (R. F. Kennedy); and the USA ('Current American trends in indexing' by Robert Collison, with eight pages of illustrations of indexes, including pictures).
The Indexer thirty years ago

Other articles focused on particular types of indexes or aspects of indexing. Bruce Harling wrote of 'The state of the indexing art in British engineering books', including a table of data showing, for 200 books, the year of publication and ratio of index to text, so deriving the average, highest and lowest percentages of index. M. Belton's article was on 'Computer-aided production of the subject index to the Safety in Mines Research Establishment bibliography'. J. Edwin Holmstrom wrote 13 pages of text, with another 12 pages of illustrations, on 'The indexing of multi-author, multi-volume and periodical publications'. He cited 11 'Recommended principles', and gave an account of the indexing of The Engineer, a weekly journal founded in 1856; of the publications of the Institution of Civil Engineers; of Science Policy News; and of the Proceedings of the British Academy. R. D. O. Beuttler wrote about 'Microform technology', and G. H. Burns on 'Journal indexes for editorial use' – indexes to back runs of journals for use in the editorial office. Sally Coole considered 'How long should an index take?', with tables of pages, hours, stages of work and types of texts.

There were also articles of general interest about indexing. John Thornton supplied three pages on 'The use of indexes'. F. H. C. Tatham considered 'What is a good index?', covering criteria, introductory notes, arrangement of subheadings, strings, the indexing of footnotes, bibliographies and plates, names and titles, the provision of supplementary information, inconsistencies and proofreading. Pondering 'whether indexing is an art or a science', he averred it to be an art, as

... individual indexers, all equally admirable, have their own particular and slightly different ways of going about their task.

One comes to recognize the brushwork... in years to come... the expert will be able to distinguish between an early Knight and a late Stallybrass.

He insists that 'indexers are not to go solely by the rule book', citing a verdict on the index to Whitaker's Almanack that 'though it broke all the canons of indexing, the person using it always could find what he wanted', and that 'indexes are compiled not for the sake of the indexer, nor the author, nor the publisher, but for the benefit of the person who has to use them... an index is not an academic exercise for the expert'.

I. Shamah, who had reported on the December 1969 'Infofair' conference, 'Management decision through information', wrote of its continuation in January 1972. J. M. Shaftesley reported that he had found the first reference to the possibly apocryphal index entry, 'Lord Chief Justice Best – his great mind'. 'The story is attributed to the invention of Leigh Hunt, who first quoted it in the Examiner.'

L. M. Harrod, still editor of The Indexer, wrote four pages on 'Training for indexing', reporting on the courses and lectures on the subject that SI had mounted. Elizabeth Wallis wrote two pages on SI's Register, its history and workings, and Norman Knight two on copyright in indexes. (This latter article was reprinted in Indexers on indexing in 1978, and thence cited by Kevin Jackson in Invisible forms in 1999 – yes, 1999 – as evidence that 'our copyright laws now [note that now] acknowledge that an index may qualify as an item of intellectual property in which the indexer has full rights of ownership!') Ruth Hines supplied a five-page annotated list of reference books for American indexers; Bruce Harling a page of titles supplementary to the list published in the previous Indexer issue. A. R. Hewitt had been interviewed on the BBC World Service; the text was printed. Harrod, as well as editing the journal and running the training courses, himself wrote all the book reviews in this issue.

Norman Knight's 80th birthday was celebrated by SI with a luncheon at Schmidt's Restaurant attended by some 40 members. In his acknowledgement to the toast, he observed that he had attended almost all the 74 meetings of Council in the 14 years since its founding, and all SI's other meetings except two (when he had been in hospital).

An indexing detective

Mrs Malory, the heroine of a series of novels by Hazel Holt, is a writer on, and occasional teacher of, English literature, and also an amateur detective. In Mrs. Malory: detective in residence (Signet, 1995), Mrs Malory has accepted an invitation from her US friend Linda to teach a one-semester course on lesser-known nineteenth-century British women writers. The two first met when Linda ‘was in England doing research for her doctorate on Mrs Gaskell and had written to ask if we could meet to discuss a paper I’d published on North and South’. Mrs Malory has travelled from her home in England to a small college in Pennsylvania and is being given a tour of the corporate headquarters of a firm that helps to fund projects at the college.

In the first-person narrative, Mrs Malory comments that Linda is highly knowledgeable about computers, ‘... and actually seems to understand them and, I must admit, when I see her making an index, say, on her own machine, I do see the point of them and feel very much that I’m living in the Stone Age with my own cards-in-a-shoebox method!’

Hazel Holt, as well as writing mystery novels, is known as the friend and literary executor of the novelist Barbara Pym, and contributed an article to The Indexer (Vol 14 No. 4, October 1987, pp. 236–7), ‘No thankless task: Barbara Pym as indexer’.

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