Reminiscences of a reviews editor

Philip Bradley

When you retire from a full-time job you might give up your normal occupation and spend the remainder of your life playing golf, bridge, or Scrabble, or tending the garden. At least that is what some people do, if my local paper is to be believed. What do you do, though, if you are not enamoured of such activities? I was fortunate. I had a new occupation waiting for me. Hazel Bell, then editor of The Indexer, had been doing all the editorial work involved in its production and wished to spread the load. I was asked if I would be willing to take on the reviewing part of the job. I happily accepted this offer and it has given me enjoyment, and an occupation, since 1984. As I had spent most of my working life in the library and educational worlds it was satisfying to be able to carry on in an area with which I was familiar.

Before I took on the job I had written a few reviews for other journals. My first efforts were for the Library Review when I reviewed some books on witchcraft, the result of a lifetime’s interest in Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley Novels. I also wrote occasional reviews for British Book News (BBN). In the case of BBN, books used to arrive by post containing a polite note asking me to review them, so I assumed that that was the accepted way of doing things. How wrong I was! The first book I sent out to a prospective reviewer, an SI member, was returned a few days later with a curt note saying that the person concerned was busy and would I, in future, check that my choice of reviewer was available. After that I made sure that I always did so.

Prospective reviewers have always been considerate and thoughtful, and that has been one reason for the job being so pleasurable. If they are unable to review a book they explain why. Sometimes they have suggested another person I might contact. Any problems which arise are nearly always solved amicably. Reviewers have sometimes asked me to alter or cut out pieces of reviews if I think they are too long, using my somewhat important-sounding ‘editorial prerogative’. Knowing reviewers’ interests and being able to rely on them has meant that fewer follow-up letters have had to be written and fewer phone calls made. Without this co-operation the job could have been frustrating and tiresome instead of enjoyable. Only rarely can I recall any serious problems arising and on only one occasion, to the annoyance of the reviewer, did I have to drastically cut an over-long review.

As far as possible, I have limited the choice of reviewer to members of SI. I feel that indexers know more about books that are of interest to them than specialists in other fields. Occasionally reviews have been written by non-members, in particular by staff at the University of Dundee.

At the beginning I kept far too many records, and when I found they were unnecessary I dropped them. Some of these records were kept on five-by-three-inch cards at a time when libraries were changing over from card catalogues to computers. This meant that I was able to acquire some hundreds of the, by then useless, used catalogue cards and use the blank side. These lasted for many years. As a well-known supermarket keeps telling us in its advertising, ‘Every little helps.’

Looking through earlier issues of The Indexer helped me to decide on the kind of books required for review. Catalogues, book lists and reviews in other journals were perused, and help also came from SI members themselves who told me of books they had seen or read about. In time, publishers contacted me about titles that they thought would be of interest and even sent books on spec, as they still do, although not all books received are reviewed. Books received can be divided into two categories: those which have been requested, and those which just arrive. When books are requested, the letter sent indicates that they may not be reviewed, but only very rarely does a publisher query the non-appearance of a review. Books received but not reviewed are listed at the end of the Reviews section in The Indexer in the column headed ‘Publications received and publications noted’.

One publisher whose work awakened my interest was the Gale Research Co., based in Detroit, USA. I had heard about its founder, Frederick Ruffner, and decided to write an article about him and the company. I contacted a member of staff, David Bianco, who gave me a great deal of information. This culminated in an article, A founding father: Frederick Ruffner and the Gale Research Co (Bradley, 1988a). The company produced many books containing statistics, a subject which seems to be have been of interest to the Japanese, because the article was subsequently translated into Japanese and published in two parts (Bradley 1988b, 1988c).

I am not familiar with the Japanese language, but it is interesting to see that proper names, numerals (including page numbers) and book titles are printed in Roman type. The contents list on the front cover is in Japanese, but inside the front cover it is repeated in Roman. Probably of no significance, owing to the difference there may be in the size of typeface, is the fact that the English version of the article occupies 10 pages, while the Japanese version takes 14 pages. But it is interesting to see one’s work in a language one doesn’t understand.

A matter which interests many indexers is whether there is a need or desire for indexes to fiction. For years this subject has come up in The Indexer and at meetings. The idea of writing an article about it came from Hazel Bell, who has strong views on the matter. I decided to get as much information as I could and to bring together the views of individuals and organizations. The result appeared as Indexes to works of fiction: the views of producers and users on the need for them (Bradley 1989). Obtaining material for the article was interesting but time-consuming. It involved contacting many people in various fields of literary production and I had correspondence with authors, publishers, reviewers, readers, literary societies and of course indexers. All
received copies of The Indexer containing the article – some 30 in all – and it is flattering to know that the article has been cited by other writers on the subject.

We all have our special interests, and one of mine is linguistics. When I began as reviews editor I was told that books for review should be of three kinds: indexes, books on indexing and books of interest to indexers. There are not that many books in the first two categories, but the third category covers a very wide field, and naturally one’s personal preferences tend to prevail. In any case, linguistics is a subject used consciously, or unconsciously, by all who write and especially those involved with literature. Oxford University Press (OUP) is possibly Britain’s top publisher on the subject and a number of their publications have been reviewed, including The Oxford thesaurus: an A–Z dictionary of synonyms edited by Laurence Urdang (Bradley, 1993). In this instance I was delighted when the editor replied with his thoughts on the review in a subsequent issue of The Indexer (Urdang, 1994).

As writers for The Indexer and, I suppose, for all learned journals, proofread their work before publication, one gets into the habit of consciously looking for errors in spelling, punctuation, typography, meaning and even style in any publication one comes across, including advertising signs. Nevertheless, we all find that, even after reading our own work a dozen times, there are still errors to be found.

Two fairly minor matters have proved bothersome during my time as reviews editor. One concerns the increase in size of The Indexer, which took place in April 1996; it no longer fits my shelves! The other is the listing of the books reviewed in the volume indexes. Until volume 19, books which had been reviewed in each volume were listed by title in one sequence under the heading 'Book reviews'. There were also entries for authors and reviewers. In the next three volumes the list of titles was dropped and the reviews listed simply as 'Reviews' or 'Book reviews' with inclusive page numbers. I found this inconvenient when checking for titles, because they were spread throughout the index and so one could not glance through the list quickly. Fortunately in Volume 23 the original method, with titles in a single sequence, has been restored.

It is interesting to note that over the last 20 years some 38 books and pamphlets written or edited by SI members in the UK have been reviewed in the pages of The Indexer. These range from the Occasional Papers published by the Society itself, to indexes, catalogues, concordances, encyclopedias and directories on subjects as diverse as Gilbert and Sullivan, topography, Shakespeare and language.

Since its beginning in 1957 the Society of Indexers has become increasingly international in character and now has officers and contacts in societies worldwide. The books reviewed in The Indexer have been mainly British publications, but include some from Australia, Canada, South Africa and of course the United States. It was with this international character of the journal in mind that we welcomed an American as joint reviews editor. From October 2000 Nancy Mulvany took on the post of North American reviews editor. Nancy does all the work – obtaining books, finding reviewers and sending the finished reviews to me – for US and Canadian publications. These are then incorporated with my reviews before going on their way for publication. This method ensures that books from other lands are represented.

Now, after receiving and sending some 10,584 letters, parcels and telephone calls over a period of 20 years I am at last handing over the responsibility for reviews. I wish Sue Lambert, my successor, well in her new job.

References

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