
My first published index was prepared for the Medical Year Book, 1924 (Heinemann), a new reference work, founded and compiled by my father Charles Richard Hewitt, who, naturally enough, cast a critical eye over my efforts before despatch. I did not expect, nor did I receive, an indexing fee. One can almost hear expressions of incredulity that someone whose earliest index was published 75 years ago is still around (and who, quite recently, revised one of his later works). But this happens to be a fact of life.

Father, a distinguished librarian in the field of medicine, was also an outstanding indexer of medical works who taught me the elements of his skill. My first task was the sorting and alphabetizing of his manuscript slips followed, progressively, by practical instruction. Eventually, he passed on to me for indexing a work entitled The Ambulatory Treatment of Fractures, published, I think, in the late 1920s, for which I did receive a small fee!

My first appointment in the world of librarianship was to the library of the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court. Consequently and fortunately my involvement in medical literature gave way to that of the law, although, oddly enough, one of my earliest indexes was to a work on the law relating to public health. Probably my first in the new field was of one of my own books, devoted to Public Library Law, 1930. The next, a summary of the same subject for students in librarianship, appeared in 1932, a modest publication of 70 pages (a page size of approximately 12.5 x 18 cm) the index to which consisted of eight pages in double column – somewhat overdone but indicative of enthusiasm.

From these early beginnings developed a fairly comprehensive coverage of the law – textbooks; numerous volumes of Halsbury’s Laws of England and Halsbury’s Statutes of England, two encyclopedic works published by Butterworths, followed by consolidated indexes to both (mammoth tasks, the former with a small team); various publications issued by the Statute Law Commission; consolidations of the laws of four former Colonies (one in 17 volumes); occasional indexes in other fields. More than seven decades of indexing (interrupted only by five years war service) was eventually brought to an end by the development and use of the computer, an inevitable fate.

During that long period (it would be impressive to refer to it as three-quarters of a century) much has changed in the world of indexing. Can any one change be regarded as the most significant? Perhaps, to be materialistic, recognition that the labourer is now worthy of his or her hire could be the most important advance remembering that, for a time after 1945, a fee of two shillings and sixpence (12 1/2 p.) per page of normal lawbook size was the norm. Compare that with today’s minimum payment, calculated by time and recommended by our Society, now in the region of £14 per hour. Some indexers prefer the earlier custom of fee per page whereby the faster worker is not at a financial disadvantage against the slower. Although adequate reward has been long in coming it might be said that growing recognition of the importance of good indexing and the professionalism of the compilers (both full and part-time) are of greater significance. Such recognition by an increasing number of publishers, authors and users of books, is mainly due to the rapid expansion and influence of the Society of Indexers (of which I am proud to have been first Chairman), followed by the formation of sister societies overseas.

The inevitable development of the computer and expansion of its use in indexing, together with the spread of IT, has given birth to a new professional jargon making it difficult for the elderly and simple-minded indexer to comprehend. Such is progress and IT must be accepted.

(see obituary on page 228)
First published in Anthology for the Millennium (Society of Indexers, 2000)