The *Indexer* thirty years ago

Hazel K. Bell

The October 1975 issue of *The Indexer*, Volume 9, No. 4, consisted of 56 pages plus the volume index. It opened with 27 pages by Tom Edwards on ‘Indexing LISA’ with the subtitle, ‘Chains, KISS and the bold approach’ – referring to the techniques of chain indexing, the principle, ‘Keep it simple and stupid’, and bold lead terms. After sustained treatment of all these as well as LISA’s origins, subject analysis, reference structure, problems of language and terminology, typographical layout, and user opinions, with full-page example illustrations, Edwards reverts again to humour at the end, quoting a quatrains on LISA indexing that had been sent to him:

> I sought it by class, I sought it by chain,  
> I tracked it through link after link;  
> But all my endeavours proved totally vain,  
> ’Cos you don’t index like Wot I fink.

Alan Gilchrist wrote of ‘The role of thesauri in mechanized systems’ (eight pages), concluding with ‘some observations about the need for deeper thinking about concept formation and relationships, and more imaginative use of computers’.

Robert Collison described ‘The indexing procedures of the *Foreign language index*’ founded by the Public Affairs Information Service of New York (over six pages), noting that ‘the computer plays an important part in maintaining the high standards achieved by the *Index*’. K. G. B. Bakewell wrote of ‘The PRECIS Indexing System’ used by *The British National Bibliography* (PREServed Context Index System) (also six pages).

Emil Pocosk recorded ‘Indexing the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*’; a 30-volume translation from the Russian, published serially with annual interim cumulative indexes to appear as soon as possible after the volumes they covered. He observed:

> The requirement of indexing one volume at a time without knowledge of the full scope of the work at first appeared only a minor annoyance, then a handicap, and finally a major consideration in tackling the whole indexing project.

The final index would be about 1,000 pages long with some half a million entries. ‘The only feasible way to carry out a plan of this scope would be to make use of some sort of indexing system.’ Accordingly Pocosk devised a suitable one, which ‘solved the major problems of producing serially published cumulative indexes and also allowed the inclusion of many other time-saving and convenient devices’.

Two contributors sent replies to Mary Kendall’s article in Volume 9 No. 2 on 19th-century book indexes, in which she had concluded:

> The most obvious differences between these nineteenth-century indexes and present-day indexes are lack of conciseness and of specificness in choice of entry word … the general style today is more crisp and streamlined.

V. C. Findlay had examined the index to *Ancient mysteries described especially the English Miracle Plays* by William Hone, printed by William Hone in 1823, and found ‘no “lack of specificness in choice of entry words”, to quote Mary Kendall’. Two pages of the index are printed in full. G. Chowdhary-Best declared:

> Mary Kendall . . . has produced evidence to show that the improvement in the indexing of books over the past seventy or so years has been by no means uniform . . . in the course of a fairly long career as a bibliographer and researcher I have made similar observations; and indeed I am tempted to assert that in the case of certain reference works a steady decline since about 1914 can be traced.

He substantiates his claim by citing a decline in indexing standards of *Hansard* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, comparing these unfavourably with the *General index to the journals of the House of Commons 1547–1714*, published 1850–52, and the indexes to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in the 1730s. In the field of legal indexing, however, he asserts, ‘it is possible to detect signs of an improvement in recent years’.

The report of the Wheatley Medal award for 1974 was illustrated by a photograph of the President of the Library Association, E. V. Corbett, presenting it to C. C. Banwell for his index to the legal work, *Encylopedia of forms and precedents*, 4th edition, in 24 volumes. Banwell wrote a page about his work on this index. He

> had had constructed to my own specification a cabinet containing twelve trays, each of which was divided to take approximately 6,000 slips, size 6 in. by 4 in. . . . Fortunately the printers engaged on Butterworths’ work are quite happy to set indexes from the slips if they are suitably marked up to show indentations and so on.

SI Council’s report for 1974–75 shows membership of 322, with 96 Registered Indexers, and 63 requests for indexers having been received from publishers the previous year. ‘It is more difficult to find suitably qualified indexers in certain areas of science and economics. Medical and legal indexers can be assured of regular work.’ John Ainsworth Gordon was the new honorary secretary, and Mary Piggott was invited to serve on Council.

A small item lists, for the first time, the indexers of volumes of *The Indexer*: there had been seven from volumes 3–9, a new one for each.

The Committee on Ethics, Standards, and Specifications
of the American Society of Indexers had published a statement on ethical responsibility of indexers and index publishers to index users, which was printed in the journal in full, over four pages.

For the first time, letters were published commenting on the regular feature, ‘Extracts from reviews’. Seeley Service were the publishers of *The Elliotts: the story of a Border clan*, a review of which in the *TLS* had been quoted in the April 1975 *Indexer* thus:

... the future Elliott Society may demand an enlarged edition: if so, a professional hand could eliminate a few minor signs of amateurism and, more importantly, improve the layout and utility of the index.

The publisher’s letter states:

I would like to make it absolutely clear that the book referred to, *THE ELLIOTTS*, was published by ourselves on behalf of the Elliott family, and we had no control over the quality or content of the index whatsoever. Whilst not claiming to be perfect, we regard such an innuendo as casting a slur on our professionalism and would ask you to make this plain in a subsequent issue of your magazine. In our particular field of publishing nobody feels more than we the need to employ top-class professionals to avoid inaccuracies.

Whilst I think the criticism was justified, it should not have been laid at our door, although, of course, I understand why it was.

*The Indexer* hon. editor comments, ‘The passage complained of did not form part of an original review in *The Indexer* but was an excerpt from the *TLS*.’

H. A. Whatley, whose review severely criticizing an index had been quoted in the previous *Indexer*, sent a similar criticism of an index from a review of his published in another journal, and a list of others in a letter he had sent to the *L.A. Record*. He observed:

I have now collected a series of works written by librarians (who know what they should provide) for librarians (who know what to look for) in which the Fourth Law is so badly broken [fourth of Ranganathan’s Five Laws, ‘Save the time of the reader’].

‘Extracts from reviews’ makes three pages of this issue. Only two books are reviewed: *Annual review of information science and technology* vol. 9, and *Copy-editing: the Cambridge handbook* by Judith Butcher.

The volume index, six pages long, was compiled by J. Edwin Holmstrom. However, the following *Indexer*, Vol. 10 No. 1, had an unusual opening. Page 1 was printed in the left column only, with ‘News of the Society’. Page 2, on its reverse, had in its right-side column:

The Hon. Editor [L. M. Harrod] regrets, and apologises for, two mishaps (both beyond his control) which occurred to the last issue.

One was the mis-folding of the middle sheet, which caused some of the text to obtrude into the Index to Volume 9. Fortunately this was easily rectified by recipients.

The other was the omission of a number of entries from the index itself; these are printed on this page, the reverse being left blank so that readers may cut them out if they wish.

Indeed, the left column of page 2 consists of a list of further index entries for volume 9, from ‘Allchin, Mrs. D. M., assistance in evaluation of PRECIS system, 163’, to ‘Thesaurus used in PRECIS system, q.v., 160’.

Hazel K. Bell is the winner of the 2005 Wheatley Medal (see page 226)