Index Makers of Today: David Lee

J. D. Lee, FLA, has occupied several domains of the information world, as, successively: Librarian, Sheffield City College of Education; lecturer in bibliography, Manchester Polytechnic; senior lecturer, Edge Hill College of Education; Assistant Borough Librarian (Hillingdon London Borough); Library Adviser, Department of Education and Science; Deputy Reference Librarian, BBC Library Service; Manager, BBC Hulton Picture Library; Data Services Manager, BBC Interactive Videodisk Unit (Domesday).

Throughout, he has indulged in indexing as an enjoyable sideline and sometime escape from an excess of management; twice, between posts, fulltime for a living. While advertising in the '70s brought plenty of indexing work, he found it not financially feasible as sole means of sustenance. Now that rare bird, a fulltime indexer *entier,* he is well placed to assess the opportunities and rewards of the indexing profession.

In 1989, redundant from two BBC posts — both units having been sold out of the Corporation — but with a pension to supplement earnings from indexing, he obtained a Government Enterprise Allowance to start a small business as a sole trader — Professional Indexing Services. Useful seminars and some inspection helped to ensure a proper business foundation. The discipline of thirty years' work in varied institutions has fostered strict business practice as a freelance: careful keeping of accounts, early (8.30 a.m.) start to a fulltime-plus stint, complete concentration on the task in hand. Living on the outskirts of London (Harrow) is a bonus, enabling him to deliver to his clients nearly half of his finished jobs and collect about a quarter from them, so fostering good personal contacts and keeping the commissions flowing. Some jobs are carried out on the clients' premises; not all is back-of-the-book work. Partly thanks to the informal network of friendly indexers, work available now exceeds the time.

David's indexing specialisms now range as widely as his former career: architecture, fine art, computing, genealogy, history/archaeology, management, bibliography compilation and database construction, with 'the media' perhaps the biggest runner. He still describes himself as a generalist: a proficient indexer 'should be able to tackle pretty well anything'. He prefers to work on those subtle, human-focused texts that need careful determination of language for headings, so that, at best the index may be read for pleasure, and displays 'the mind of the indexer at work'. He shows a rare subjective appreciation and expression of what it is to be an indexer, telling an ALPSP seminar in 1981, 'The indexer may have to think in a rather technical, structured, perhaps somewhat alien way... at some point with every index, put your mind at a distance and think over every entry. The thrill in indexing, greater even than the moment when the first run on slipmaking is finished, lies in the editorial control one exercises, the thinking about what is now going to happen, if you make it. The indexer becomes creator as well as a long-distance runner'.

Even machine systems for retrieving information need human interpretation and linguistic subtlety, he claims: narrowing the search among the enormous amount of material they hold is 'a delicate task' where indexers have an important role to play, only just being realized by the technologists. He retains an interest in developments in networking, etc., regretting that his training in information work did not come later.

Spared market and economic constraints, David would most like to provide indexes for the many historical volumes which lack and need them, publishing them himself as an entrepreneur, rather than the obligatory 'knee-jerk indexing on call'. Like most free-lancers, he feels too much of his work is carried out under pressure of time.

David mostly works on *5 x 3"* slips, sorting manually, and using his Government-sponsored computer as a word-processor, with occasional resort to MACREX.

How does freelancing compare with office/library work? More solitary, of course, with less distraction, needing strength of personality as well as aptitude. To go from the control of tens of staff to that of thousands of words is a wrench—an added reason for visiting his clients—fellow humans. He hoped, on turning freelance, that scheduling his own work might allow more time to be spared for other interests, but Parkinson's law obtains most rigorously for home-workers, who cannot leave their papers miles out of reach in the office. David squeezes in some other congenial activities, though, lecturing on artistic and archaeological matters, writing on picture libraries, reference work, and videodisks, and chairing the Editorial Board of *Learned Publishing.* The connection with book and journal publishing, the transmission of culture in the broad sense, has always been important to him; libraries merely one aspect of this.

David joined the Society of Indexers in 1970, and was appointed to its Council in 1981 as representative of Aslib. He was Deputy Editor of *The Indexer* for three years, Chairman of its Editorial Board for two, and Chairman of SI for 1984 and 1985. He would have liked then to have fostered better relations with the book trade, giving indexers the position he thinks they deserve, but his time coincided with the hard work on the BBC's Domesday Project and—another tram passed!

David had an active time working with tough bodies and trade organizations in the videodisk and picture world, and misses those days. A soft indexer from a bureaucratic background, he shows how institutionally acquired practices may be applied in individual freelancing, generating both businesslike efficiency and enjoyment.

Since trading as Professional Indexing Services David has compiled over two hundred indexes, notably to: *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts;* a handbook on industrial safety; the last two volumes of Asa Briggs' *History of the British Broadcasting Corporation;* and a most sensitive text, *Some other rainbow.* This story of Beirut hostage John McCarthy and Jill Morrell offered issues of human suffering and emotion to be reduced to discrete linguistic terms, logically structured: the highest challenge to indexers, he holds. Indexes to other hostages Jackie Mann's and Terry Waite's stories also came his way; though he knows *he* is a hostage only to freelancing.

Hazel K. Bell