Friday, October 13, 1961.

Whether any given book should or should not be provided with an index is a question on which authors and publishers on the one hand, and reviewers and readers on the other, do not always see eye to eye. Book critics, it has been noted, have a way of ending otherwise favourable reviews by accusing authors of slackness, and publishers of parsimony, in failing to provide this piece of apparatus; and they have the support of that young but flourishing body, the Society of Indexers. Readers are apt to grumble—and who shall blame them?—if they have to wade right through an indexless book in order to find the single fact or the solitary date that they are looking for.

No one has ever suggested that novels should have indexes. At the other end of the scale, scholarly books that will be consulted rather than read must obviously be indexed. The problem children are the betwixt and between books, written with a view to entertainment rather than instruction. Their authors may modestly feel that such works do not really rate indexes; and their publishers, always ready to save a little money here and there and to keep published prices down, may well agree with them. When people grumble that books of this kind have been put on the market in an incomplete state, and that having read a book of travel, of sport, or of adventure from cover to cover they may want to turn back and refer to specific passages, it is possible to remind them that, if they so wish, they can always make amateur indexes of their own, noting down page numbers on a convenient end-paper or fly-leaf.

Book buyers and book borrowers occasionally have rather off-beat reasons for demanding indexes. There are the index-fanciers, who are said to derive a greater satisfaction from a well-compiled index than they do from a page of sparkling prose. There are a surprisingly large number of readers who, before they embark on a biography, like to turn up the page reference to the death of the book’s central character. And, before they decide whether or not to buy the latest best-selling autobiography, some vain spirits want an index to consult in order to make quite certain that their own names have been mentioned, even in passing, by the illustrious author.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Times October 16

Sir,—You say in your leading article today, “No one has ever suggested that novels should have indexes”.

I possess a translation of Tolstoy’s Resurrection, published by Messrs. Grosset and Dunlap of New York and “illustrated from the photoplay produced by Inspiration Pictures Inc.”, which has a particularly felicitous index. The first entry is: “Adultery, 13, 53, 68, 70”; the last is: “Why do people punish?
Between them occur such items as: Cannibalism, Dogs, Good breeding, Justification of one’s position, Seduction, Smoking, Spies, and Vegetarianism.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

EVELYN WAUGH.

Combe Florey House, Combe Florey, near Taunton, Oct. 13.

The Times October 18

Sir,—Although your “fourth leader” of October 13 deals in light vein, as is its wont, with the subject of indexes to books, nevertheless it is a matter of much concern to librarians in charge of reference collections as well as to scholars and students. There is a growing tendency today for books even of a scholarly and informative nature to be published without indexes. This greatly detracts from their usefulness and reference value. One would not expect books written purely for entertainment to have indexes, but many published for popular consumption contain useful facts which are lost because they are not indexed.

I am sure I shall be supported by scholars, students, and my fellow librarians in asking publishers to consider the inclusion of an index not merely from the point of view of additional cost but also on the grounds of the increased usefulness to the reader. From my own experience, I know that many books without indexes are rejected as useless for a reference library.

Yours faithfully,

A. H. HALL, Librarian.


The Times October 20

Sir,—A classic among indexes can be found at the end of Volume VI of Sir Donald Tovey’s Essays in Musical Analysis. Here, there are such entries as “Agnostic, see Dachshund”, “Ablative Absolute, see Passacaglia”, and “Appendicitis, see Cadenza”; and no music critic should omit to follow up the cross-reference under “Critics”.

Yours faithfully,

DAVID C. HAYES.

21a Kenilworth Road, Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, Oct. 16.

The Times October 21

Sir,—The wrath that may be evoked by the omission of an index (your “fourth leader” of October 13 and Mr. Hall’s comments of October 18) is of long standing. As for example, John Baynes (1758-1787)—“The man who publishes a book without an index ought to be damned 10 miles beyond hell, where the Devil himself cannot get for stinging nettles”.

Yours faithfully,

W. H. J. VERNON.

53 Revell Road, Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, Oct. 19.
Sir,—The index to the Crowther Report, “15 to 18”, contains the following item: Cambridge (see under Oxford).

Yours truly,

Ann H. Spokes.


The Times October 24

Sir,—Johnson in March, 1751, asked his friend Richardson to add an index Rerum to Clarissa and in September, 1753, he repeated and augmented his request by pleading for “an accurate index to the three works”, i.e., Pamela, Clarissa, and Grandison. Richardson complied by providing Grandison, 1754, with an “Index Historical and Characteristical of the Seven Volumes of this Work”. But he did more than this, much more. He added to editions three and four of Clarissa duodecimo and octavo respectively, issued simultaneously in 1751, a kind of concordance, entitled “A Collection of Such of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Contained in the Preceding History”, and in 1755 he published as a separate work “A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and reflexions, Contained in the Histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison”, which is described in the Preface as a “General Index both of Maxims and Reflections”.

Professor W. R. Keast, of Cornell, has with infinite care shown that Johnson took nearly 80 per cent of the illustrative quotations from Clarissa for his Dictionary from that part of this index published in 1751 and not from the novel itself. Samuel Richardson and Samuel Johnson deserve well of the Society of Indexers.

Yours faithfully,

L. F. Powell.

228 Woodstock Road, Oxford, Oct. 21.

The Times October 26

Sir,—As I understand it publishers usually leave index-making to authors, some of whom think they are qualified to make their own index. This is often wrong, because authors are inclined to judge the necessity for an index entry only by their own knowledge of the subject. Some other authors think that index-making is a simple task and pass the work to untrained people, who usually produce a mere list of names (at a low fee).

Both publisher and author, with their eyes on publication date, expect an index to be completed within a few days of the page-proofing of the book. As a result the work has to be rushed. In the main—with noteworthy exceptions—both publisher and author limit the space to be devoted to the index.

All this is unfair to the index-makers, of whom there are too few trained for the work. Indexers are not born, they are made. A good index adds greatly to the value of a good book but it also shows up the gaps in one that is “woolly”.

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If the Society of Indexers can raise the standard of indexing and the pay of
the indexers it will be doing a magnificent job of work.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

J. S. MAYWOOD.

2 Headley Drive, Epsom.

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their individual writers.

ONE INDEX, OR MORE THAN ONE?

It is often asked: Should a book (or journal) have more than one index, and
if so when? This highly controversial question, so vital to producers of both
books and indexes alike, does not seem to have been answered with the authorita-
tive pronouncements its importance would appear to deserve.

It is true that Rule No. 1 of the old Index Society, which was founded in
1878 but had an independent existence of only a few years, is unequivocal enough;
it states: “Every work should have one index to the whole set”. J. T. Walsh\(^1\)
indeed cites this rule as discouraging the provision of separate indexes for proper
names and subjects. But from the context of his own explanation of the rule the
father of modern indexing, Henry B. Wheatley\(^2\), who was himself largely instru-
m ental in formulating the “General Rules for Alphabetical Indexes” in 1878,
makes it appear that the prohibition refers rather to independent indexes for the
separate volumes of one work (unless they are also combined in the final volume).

I cannot trace that R. L. Collison refers to this particular topic either in his
standard work on indexing\(^3\) or in his quite recent Indexing books (Benn, 1962),
nor does Sina Spiker in her Indexing your book (University of Wisconsin Press,
1955). But Carey\(^4\) in his own cautious manner has some quite admirable remarks
on this subject.

As a rule, for any single work (even though it runs to more than one volume), a
single comprehensive alphabetical index is preferable to a main index supplemented by
one or more classified indexes. There are, of course, exceptions: for instance, in a legal
book that refers to numerous law-cases, or a theological book containing many Biblical
references, a subsidiary index of cases or of quotations, respectively, may be most helpful.
But the balance of advantage leans more often towards the inclusion of every kind of
heading under a single alphabet.

The only appropriate reference in the American Standard of Indexing\(^5\) is:
“Indexes should cover all material in the work indexed,” which owing to its use of
a plural subject is distinctly ambiguous from the point of view of our inquiry. May
I express the hope that the forthcoming British Standard will not only be far
more precise but will also come down definitely on the side of a single index in
every case unless there is some overwhelming reason to the contrary in the
individual work concerned.