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,

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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 authoritative 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 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, who was himself largely instrumental 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 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 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 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.
The present writer has been privileged to see a copy of an excellent memorandum on indexing which Herbert Rees has prepared for the guidance of the Heinemann Group. In this, while conceding that "ideally a book should contain only one index, as this makes for ease of reference", he considers that in some, not necessarily ultra-scholarly, books the provision of more than one index may be desirable. Mr. Rees instances a book on Biblical Archaeology published in 1957, which was thought to require no fewer than five indexes: (1) Modern Names of Persons, Societies, Institutions, etc. (76 entries); (2) Biblical Names of Persons, Tribes, Buildings, etc. (300 entries); (3) Biblical Place-names (357 entries); (4) Subjects (96 entries); (5) Biblical Passages (700 entries). Now I have seen these indexes and in my view they are (the whole five of them) unexceptionable in quality. But why all this massive proliferation? I should have thought that the only topic that could possibly require a separate alphabet was (5), although in a general index a different typography (say, italics, or large and small capitals) could usefully be employed for the headings of (2) and (3) and its use explained in a preliminary note.

Again, early this year there was published by Routledge the second volume of an outstanding work, The note-books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by Kathleen Coburn (a member of the Society of Indexers). This has three separate indexes: (1) Names of Persons; (2) Selected Titles; (3) Place Names. All are beyond praise, but why not one General Index?

The danger, of course, of having a number of indexes to the same work is that the researcher may so easily become bogged down in the wrong index and, not at once finding the object of his search, may give up his quest in disgust. After all, if such a work as the Encyclopaedia Britannica, with its vast diversity of material, can be content with but one index, why cannot lesser publications?

I am aware that a number of journals (but not The Indexer) still cling to separate indexes for Authors and Subjects. But I can see no particular point in this, nor any added "ease of reference". An author may very well be also a subject and it is annoying to have to consult two indexes to make sure of having found all the available information concerning him (or her). It must be remembered that an index is (or should be) quite distinct from a library catalogue. On this particular point, No. 2 of Wheatley's "General Rules" is quite explicit: "Indexes to be arranged in alphabetical order, proper names and subjects being united in one alphabet." (The italics are mine.)

The foregoing notes may appear thoroughly biased. But so far from intending to propagate a particular viewpoint, my real object in penning this article has been to elicit information and I hope that the Editor may be willing to open his columns to members and readers who may wish to air their views on this subject.

G. N. K.

1 John W. T. Walsh. The Indexing of books and periodicals. Arnold, 1930.