HOW I INDEXED DICKENS’S LETTERS

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—Or at least the first volume! There are eleven more to follow—coming up in a celebratory sort of way to 1970, the centenary of Dickens’s death. The plan is that the final volume should contain a complete index, including a common-noun subject index and a full index of Dickens himself. Meanwhile the index of each volume is confined to persons, publications and places.

None better than an indexer to know the shortcomings of his own index. To write about it now after one volume is to whistle in the dark. Still, I must welcome this chance of formulating principles post facto, thus to further my education through succeeding volumes and maybe to help others to know at least some of the vicissitudes of the long literary index.

The first lesson is that there can be no waiting for a comfortable beginning with a nice clean set of page proofs. With complex and scholarly editions of major authors, the indexer may have to begin with the typescript, as I did, or at latest with the first slip proofs. It is now over fifteen years since my friend Humphry House sought me out with the exciting news that Rupert Hart-Davis the publisher had invited him to edit a definitive edition of the Letters. He asked me to join his editorial committee as indexer. For editing purposes he clearly saw that he would need a card-index far ahead of publication. So I began with the typed copies of the letters, many of them undated or with putative dates since found to be erroneous. What I should have done was to give each letter a number and raced through them, carding the names and numbers mechanically. A computer would have done it better. Instead, I plodded on slowly, reading for interest, letting myself be taken along by-ways, doing a bit of delving here and there. I had not got very far when Humphry House died in 1955. What would have been a great and personal contribution to Dickens scholarship for all time was ‘untimely stoppd’. That the edition survived at all was owing, first, to the fact that Humphry House had meticulously laid down the principles of the edition and had educated his editorial committee in carrying them out; secondly, Rupert Hart-Davis, himself a skilled editor, who was a member of the editorial committee, remained steadfast to his original vision of the Complete Letters; and thirdly, the Pilgrim Trust, which was supporting the edition, did not lose heart. So the indexer was not let off; and Volume One, edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey, was published by the Clarendon Press in February of this year.

I dwell upon this background history because I want to emphasize the advantage to the indexer of being associated with his editor or author from the very beginning. I cannot regret this even though much of the early indexing work was wasted effort. I smile at myself now when I look back at the simple-minded enthusiasm with which I sat down to a pile of Dickens’s correspondence. But it

The substance of a talk given at the Society’s A.G.M. on 29th May, 1965.
suited me, whose method is always more empirical than doctrinaire. I always put off any decision about what an index is going to look like until the last possible moment. Thus to splash about for a long time in the shallows without getting anywhere would enable me, I hoped, to swim better in the deep end.

The deep end was to be the final monster volume with everything in it. But, as it became clear that volumes would be published at intervals of a year or even two years, I felt that each volume should have at least a proper name index. The hope at that time was for enough space at the end of each volume for names and page numbers—not so much an index as a check-list, what I came afterwards to call ‘a contemptible collection of digits’. Clearly it had to be more than that. I began to think that an analytical index would be possible in the space available. The extent of the analysis seemed to me to be not only a question of space. The central problem was that the indexer cannot derive the relative value of any item in the text from the text alone. All of it may be trivial, all of it may be important. No one knows for what uses the Letters will be consulted in future years, nor what breadth of interests they will serve. What may be important for one purpose may be insignificant for another. The indexer must not therefore be selective nor impose a scale of values either of his own or derived from Dickens. All is equal—the publication of Pickwick and the six-o’clock bus from Brompton.

What was wanted was a break-down of the material under broad heads. The index sins again and again against the rule that there should not be more than four or five undifferentiated references. To have introduced a great deal more descriptive matter simply out of regard for this rule would often have given a significance which was not borne out by the text nor justified by anticipation of the interests of future readers. It would also frequently have meant that readers would find little more in the text than they already knew from the index. To make reference to the text unnecessary is often for me an ideal of indexing, but to have followed this ideal with Dickens would have made the index unbearably long and confusing, with sub-classification carried to the fourth or fifth degree.

A biographer of Dickens once told me that he would expect an index to show the number of times Dickens dined with Forster. This my index will show. It does not, however, say whether they dined at home, at a pub or a club, or the house of a mutual friend (although with a little ingenuity a reader can find that pages 331 and 506 indicate that Ainsworth was also present at dinner). Better, it seemed a straight run of dinners with Forster than to break the sequence (and the chronology) by giving each occasion a separate significance and a keyword of its own. The food was not necessarily better at the Athenaeum than at the Freemasons’ Arms, or if it were, Dickens did not mention it.

Even in a straight run of numbers, it was possible, where advisable, to identify a reference by putting a descriptive word, often a quoted word, in brackets after the page number. This is quite a good trick and gives the indexer a little leeway outside the strict classification, and without breaking the page sequence. This last may be important where the consultant is likely to want to look up all the references in order but may also wish to pick out one in particular. The following extract
is an example of this device where it has been rather heavily used:—

DICKENS, Mrs. Charles: Courtship and marriage: comments on her feelings and sentiments (see also below cross) 61 (‘coldness’), 79 (‘anxiety’), 87 (‘forebodings’), 97 (‘unjust’), 99 (his ‘pleasure’ in not being with her), 104 (‘amiable and excellent’), ib. (CD to love her ‘once more’), 109 (his letters ‘stiff’), ib. (‘objection’ to CD’s riding), 110 (‘distrustful’).

Then follow the reference to ‘cross’. The two related blocks of references come together because the helpful alphabet makes ‘cross’ follow ‘comments’. Dickens called his future wife cross, or in his baby language ‘coss’, seven times, and these seven references have been taken out of the ‘comments’ sequence and promoted to a sub-group of their own.

The longer articles are arranged in paragraphs, each with its own italicized heading, and the alphabetization of the headings decides the order of the paragraphs. The recurrent heading ‘CD, relations with’ comes nearly always early on in any articles in which it occurs, and as an author’s writings are generally better listed at the end of other material about him, I chose the heading ‘Works’ rather than ‘Publications’ (an indexer I often think is fortunate in that birth begins with a ‘b’, career with a ‘c’, and death with a ‘d’).

Within the paragraphs the sub-headings are also arranged alphabetically. Where further classification was called for I used the bracket device mentioned above, but occasionally had to insert the em-rule to indicate the repetition of the sub-head. For the most part, however, I managed to avoid sub-sub-indexing by taking it out and putting it elsewhere with a cross-reference. But this sometimes has its disadvantages as I shall show.

The two goals—completeness and compression—posed two major questions: the extent to which subsidiary subjects should be brought under one subject head, and the extent of the cross-referencing. For instance, I followed my masters, Dr. L. F. Powell, editor and indexer of Boswell, and Dr. E. S. de Beer, editor and indexer of Evelyn, and assembled topographical information under the one place-name. There is to my mind a great advantage, for instance, in having all the localities and buildings in London listed together. Those places in London which have a good deal of descriptive matter to themselves are cross-referenced out to separate articles, but space allowed few cross-references inwards to the main article. This may sometimes infuriate the consultant. Thus, if he wants a reference to the Freemasons’ Arms, he has to learn to find it under ‘LONDON: Hotels, inns’. Having grasped the principle he may find it tiresome when he looks up ‘LONDON: Theatres’ to find he is referred to separate articles for Covent Garden and Drury Lane in the main alphabetical sequence. The reason for this is obvious, but it is nevertheless a drawback. Up to a point cross-references are a great saver of space, but the point has to be carefully watched.

From these few observations it will be seen, I think, that the intended virtue of the index to the Letters does not lie so much in a multiplex analysis as in its synthesis—or to be less philosophic in its compression. This aim meant that when the entries on the cards on any one subject were brought together, all the cards had to be laid out and the entries looked up afresh. It was then possible to see how a sub-heading could be devised to bring together this half-dozen or so of entries, or how by modifying the sub-heading or introducing a sub-sub-head...
ing a link could be established with a further batch of cards. So the entries were slimmed down to their essentials, grouped and re-grouped and grouped again. For me the fascination of indexing lies in this vast game of patience.

Index to the Royal United Services Institution Journal

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The generous support of the Kansas State University Overhead Research Grants Committee, the kindness of Mr. D. W. King, Librarian of what was, when the project started, the War Office Library, and the willing support of the Editor, has made it possible to bring out a full index to this Journal. This will be published in February, 1965, by University Microfilms, of Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A. ($8.00 post paid.)

Members of the Institution may be interested to know how the work was accomplished.

Prints of the decennial printed indices up to their demise in 1906 were obtained from the War Office Library and from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Then a microfilmer was employed to copy the annual indices for the years 1906-1920, when the Editor's card file was started. The latter was also filmed. The resulting 792-frame reel was sent to University Microfilms, where it was run onto a 1,100-foot long print. When all the pieces reached Manhattan, Mrs. Wing sat down with single-edged razor blades, 1,188 yards of double-sided Scotch tape, and 14,000 used IBM cards, and separated all the items into alphabetical author and subject sets. University Microfilms then supplied special double-column paper, designed to fit their copiers, upon which the entire work was typed. The end product took 223 hours in cutting and sorting and 400 in typing. The total cost before publication came to approximately $600.

The author Index provides some interesting notes on the early productivity, or lack of it, on the part of persons who later rose to high rank. It also includes occasional obituaries. There are such strange things as that Captain B. H. Liddell Hart (cited as Capt. B. H. L. Hart) wrote nothing, or had no article published, in the Journal from 1931 to 1959. Major-General J. F. C. Fuller, after starting with some early astute pieces on penetration tactics, seems not to have published in the magazine from 1925 until 1962. Yet both these men were prolific writers. Conversely, one searches often in vain for any contributions from many officers who did reach high rank, such as Lord Wolseley. Once they were famous, of course, these officers usually delivered a lecture at the Institution, which would then be published as an article.

There are some errors in the Index, for which we apologize. It was deemed better, owing to the limited budget and considerable expense of the work as it was, to leave these minor typographical errors rather than to make manual corrections. Otherwise, it is hoped that the work will be useful to all who wish to find material in the back volumes of the Journal, which contains a unique collection of articles found in no other military periodical published in Britain or the United States.