THE LENGTH OF BOOK INDEXES

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Publishers sometimes warn indexers that only so many pages are available for the index. Making the best use of the space is then an interesting challenge to one's powers. On other occasions, the length of the index is left to the indexer's judgment, and some doubt may be felt as to whether one is over- or under-indexing. The length of the index must of course depend primarily on the nature of the book and the kind of index required, and it may be of interest to have some facts about the percentages of space occupied by indexes in books on various subjects. I give the results of a brief survey.

Indexes are almost always set in type smaller than that used in the main text of the book. The increase in the number of lines in a page of index over that in a page of text may be as little as 7% or as much as 120%. Because of this variation, the size of an index is better measured in lines than in pages. The figures given below represent the number of lines in the index, expressed as a percentage of the number of lines in the rest of the book, all figures being approximations only. Indexes are usually in double columns; a page of two columns, each of fifty lines, is reckoned as fifty lines of index. The number of lines on a page of text is taken as the number on a full page in the type mainly used; passages set in smaller type (quotations, etc.) are ignored. Very short books (less than 150 pages) were not considered, nor were very long books in several volumes with a final index volume; indexes of what one might call 'token' length were also excluded.

Most of the indexes of a number of recent books on history were found to fall into the range of 5% to 8% of the text. The indexes of the six volumes of Winston Churchill's *Second world war* average 6.5%, with a range of 5.7% to 7.0%. (It may be noted that the indexes to his *History of the first world war* were in the range of 1.6% to 2.9%). A book falling outside the 5% to 8% range is A. J. P. Taylor's *New English history, 1914-1945*, with an index of over 11%. Another book with long indexes is C. R. L. Fletcher's *Making of western Europe* (Vol. I, 10.3%; Vol. II, 14.1%), and the indexes of the *New Cambridge modern history* run up to 10%. Outside the range on the other side are Nehru's *Glimpses of world history* (2.6%) and G. M. Trevelyan's *History of England* (3.7%); his *Social history* has a longer index (7.6%). That Victorian classic, Green's *Shorter history of the English people*, falls into the central group (5.1%).

Biographies are on the whole more lightly indexed than history, and more likely to have no index. Out of twenty-two biographies published between 1899 and 1965, sixteen had indexes in the range 1% to 4%, with a tendency towards increasing length in the newer books. Of the remaining six, four had indexes between 5% and 6%. Two had unusually
long indexes, Lord Beveridge's autobiography *Power and influence* (9.7%), and Mrs. Battiscombe's life of Mrs. Gladstone (9.5%).

The length of indexing in geographical books is very variable. Discursive books describing travel, or a particular district (e.g. Hale's *County Books*), mostly have indexes in the 2% to 5% range. Scoresby's *Arctic regions*, published in 1820, falls into this range with a 2.3% index. Two large university textbooks of geography were found to have indexes of only 2% and 3.7%. Those of two histories of exploration reached 5.3% and 6.2%, and that of *The Domesday geography of S.E. England* 8%. Muirhead's *Blue Guides* have 6% to 9% indexes, in three columns. For the present purpose, these were reckoned in the same way as two-column indexes, as if in continuous lines across the page, but calculations for three-column indexes ought perhaps to include a small weighting for increased number of entries, making the results rather higher. Doughty's *Arabía deserta* has a combined index and glossary of Arabic words amounting to 13.5% of the text.

The length of indexes in books on science is more clearly related to the standard of difficulty of the text. Books for general readers, and for sixth formers and first-year undergraduates, mostly have 3% to 5% indexes. For more advanced textbooks, 6% to 8% indexes are usual, often in three columns in books on medicine and chemistry. At the top of the scale are some very large, highly specialized books, with two-column indexes as long as 15% of the text. Some of the annual reviews of the sciences also have (three-column) author and subject indexes amounting together to 15%.

These observations might be continued, but enough has been said to show some general trends. To pursue the subject in a worth-while way would require much more extensive sampling, and better mathematics. One thing that has not been touched on is the relation between the length and the usefulness of an index.

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**A 19th CENTURY INDEXER**

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A letter written in 1838 will seem very familiar to present-day indexers.

The letter reads as follows:

April 23rd, 1838.

My dear Friend,

Here is some more work for you. The Index is now wanted by the Printer. I am ashamed to hurry you, but it will be a convenience to have it as soon as you can send it. I hope you will like the selection of the letters.

With invariable gratitude and esteem.

Ever your faithful friend,

J. Baron.

The author of the letter was John Baron, M.D., 1786-1851, and the selection of letters that needed indexing in the usual hurry was his edition of Edward Jenner's letters, which comprised the second volume of his life of Jenner.

Volume I, the biography, was published in 1827, and Volume II, the letters, was published in 1838.

Baron got to know Jenner as a fellow medical man in 1809, as Jenner's home and practice were in the Vale of Berkeley,