LET'S HAVE AN IMPROVEMENT IN BRITISH BOOK INDEXES*

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Presumably publishers, like other educated people, use libraries: what would they think of a library where they could not trace a wanted volume without going round the shelves, book by book? A book without an index is like a library without a catalogue, yet there are firms which issue subject books with either no index, or one so inadequate as to be useless.

Of course, this is not true of every British publisher, nor is it even true of every book published by the worst offenders: the incidence of good and bad indexes seems to be somewhat haphazard, but the general level of performance is not high. Don't publishers use books? If they do, don't they draw the moral from the bad indexes they come across, and amend their own bad ways?

In this country, as yet, there is no widespread tradition of pride in this aspect of book production; are you as proud of your firm's book indexing as of the typography, casing or jacket? To judge by the perfunctory indexes perpetrated in some firms, apparently by the office boy, the index is widely regarded as a regrettable convention, rather than an integral part of each volume, as significant of the care bestowed upon it as the proof reading.

A friend whose book was accepted by a well-known publishing house stipulated that an index be included, and had an appropriate clause incorporated in the contract. He was surprised when in the end he had to threaten legal action to have an index provided in the published volume: not every author has the perspicacity, or the persistence, to achieve a similar result.


Fixed amount

Probably, this is one of the expenses which have been kept to a fixed amount in order to 'cushion' the publishers against other rising costs, and to keep book prices down. One is creditably informed that fees to indexers by some publishers have not risen since before the war, and that a similar neglect applies to readers of manuscripts.

If that is the case, one would suggest it is false economy. Hitherto it has been possible for the feckless or unscrupulous publisher to adopt the traditional attitude of neglect, and to make but a token acknowledgment of the need for an index.

There is no consumer protection for readers or students, no Which? survey of book indexes (perhaps there should be?) and in consequence publishers are apt to overlook, or underestimate, the importance of enabling readers to refer, or refer back, to treatment of specific topics mentioned in their books.

It is probable, however, that they may continue to do so with impunity no longer,
for two reasons. The first is that the growth of education makes for a more critical, and more articulate public. The second, and probably more effective, is the growth of a world market, in which British books compete, not merely with one another, but also with those of other countries, and particularly with American publications, for American books are usually much better indexed than British.

No doubt exceptions can be found to this, as to any generalisation, but librarians' experience is that it is true more often than not. Comparing an American with a British book on the same subject, of approximately the same length, and both by reputable houses, the American work will usually be more fully indexed, and so will be more useful to the prospective reader.

If you doubt this, test it by comparing a few of your own publications with the principal American rivals in the same field: where the two are in direct competition, as in the overseas markets, the difference is important.

As an experiment, five standard histories of England from the library shelf were checked—four published in London and the fifth in the United States. The average number of text words per index entry worked out at 52, 61, 54 and 46 for the English books; the American ratio was 40 words per index entry.

Fortunately there is evidence to suggest that some publishers have seen the writing on the wall, and have begun to give greater attention to indexing, commissioning professional indexers to complete their books for them. It is also true, unfortunately, that this is not an automatic passport to success. One remembers the cri-de-coeur of an editor friend whose anthology of essays had been indexed by a so-called professional, and who discovered that two of the chapters had been completely ignored!

It is interesting, and probably significant, that recent winners of the Library Association’s Wheatley Medal for a book index have been the authors themselves. One would not go so far as a colleague, however, who stated recently, ‘The only indexes one can trust are those of the Calendar of Patent Rolls of the Public Record Office’.

Survival of casual

Where indexes are perfunctory (and it would be invidious to single out individual examples by name; few publishers are blameless in this regard) it would seem to indicate a survival of the casual, amateur approach of an earlier period in publishing.

Presumably one does not need to remind publishers that only the efficient professional may hope to survive in present conditions, and that flair, an indulgent parent and a penchant for ‘belles-lettres’ are not enough? In publishing, as in cricket, ‘gentlemen’ add an intriguing touch of idiosyncrasy, and can make a useful contribution; but if they provide the ‘jam’, financial success is based on the bread-and-butter work of the ‘players’ on the team, and good indexing is a feature of professional publishing—the lack of it a sign of amateurishness.

Reference books

Publishers will know, and one hopes they are applying, British Standard 3700: 1964. Recommendations for the preparation of indexes for books, periodicals and other publications, which is elaborated in that excellent pamphlet, Making an index, by G. V. Carey, the third edition of which was published by Cambridge University Press in 1963, at 3s. 6d.

For anyone wishing to go more deeply into the mysteries, the books by R. L.
Collison, Librarian of the British Broadcasting Corporation, are recommended. These are: *Indexing books* (1962) and *Indexes and Indexing* (2nd ed. 1959), both published by Ernest Benn.

One could quote hundreds of ‘horrible examples’; nearly every review section of newspapers and literary weeklies contains the expression of a critic’s regret at the absence, or the inadequacy, of a book’s index. But one has particular reason for remembering the scholarly volume issued by a university press which contains 265 quarto pages, 130,000 words—and no index.

Librarians in particular deplore the selectiveness of the index to a standard social history of this country, which suggests from its entries that the only mention of public libraries in this country is for the 17th century, although careful perusal of the text discovers quite adequate treatment of the subject: omissions such as this result in mistrust of the whole work.

There is likely to be no legislation in respect of this aspect of British manufacturers. Is there, perhaps, scope for a voluntary agreement—a publishing code—to which all would be invited to adhere? It is thoughts such as these which prompted the institution of the Wheatley Medal by the Library Association, as a method of drawing attention to the need for better indexing, and of giving recognition where it was deserved in this neglected field.

The Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals for children’s books have not been without effect. One hopes that British book indexes will soon improve similarly, but has the uncomfortable feeling that it will be a slower process!

**NEWS OF THE SOCIETY**

Members have been keeping their Secretary and the Council busy with various matters of interest. From overseas Mrs. Brenda Miller, our corresponding member from Australia, writes that she has moved with her husband to Clayton in Victoria and would be pleased to attend to inquiries concerning the Society in that part of the world. Her new, but temporary, address is given on the last page of this issue. Mr. J. C. Wyllie, a life member and correspondent for the Southern States of the U.S.A., has from time to time passed on news on indexing from his library at the University of Virginia. Dr. Theodore C. Hines, a member from Columbia University, New York, U.S.A., has prepared in association with Mrs. Jessica L. Harris *Computer filing of index, bibliographic and catalog entries*, (School of Library Service, Columbia University, New York.) Mrs. K. H. Parker from Ottawa, Canada, has sent us an *Index of the Debates of the Senate of Canada*. She is Index and Revisions Clerk to the Senate.

Back in England there is much to report on members’ activities. Brigadier E. E. G. L. Searight, C.B.E., M.C., has helped an inquirer by discussing the tricky problem of indexing Islamic names; his notes are reproduced in this issue. Several members had an opportunity to meet Mr. Robert J. Palmer and his wife, at the beginning of October. Mr. Palmer, a member from New York, was in England for a short while on holiday. They both had an opportunity to meet our Chair-