AN UNUSUAL METHOD OF MAKING A BOOK INDEX

A SYMPOSIUM

Oliver Stallybrass submitted an article with this title. It was considered suitable as a basis for a symposium to which a number of members were invited to contribute. Mr. Stallybrass's article—with an addendum—is printed first.

OLIVER STALLYBRASS

Without having made an exhaustive search of the literature, I have the impression that book indexes are almost invariably compiled by means of cards or slips of paper; and that the use of a thumb-indexed notebook, which is not mentioned in Collison's standard work, would strike most indexers as heretical, indeed as utterly and obviously retrograde. Needless to say, this would be true in the case of any index which was going to remain in that form, while continuing to grow; but as a stepping-stone to a typed, and ultimately printed, index the thumb-indexed notebook seems to me, after a single experiment in its use, to have, for many types of book, overwhelming advantages.

The book in question, which I indexed for Secker & Warburg, was a 270-page translated biography, by Philippe Jullian, of the fin-de-siècle writer, wit, dandy and aesthete Robert de Montesquiou (the original of Proust's Baron de Charlus). The French edition had no index, but my allowance of ten double-column pages, together with my preliminary reading, underlining and annotating, suggested that a 200-page, 7in. x 4½in., stiff-backed notebook costing 4/3d. would be adequate; and so it proved. (I would, as it turned out, have needed about 22/- worth of 5in. x 3in. cards.)

The first step was to allocate a precise section of the alphabet to each recto or right-hand page. This I did by counting the number of recto pages for each letter, dividing the index of Chambers's encyclopaedia into the appropriate number of roughly equal sections for each corresponding letter, and inscribing accordingly the top right-hand corner of each recto in the notebook—keeping the captions mutually exclusive but never longer than three initial letters, and ignoring the more improbable combinations; thus the nine pages for B were B-Bap, Bar-Baz (ignoring Baq), Bea-Bem, Ben-Bez, Bi-Bl (there being no references to the Bhagavad-Gita), Bo, Bra-Bri, Bro-Buk and Bul-By.

The index of Chambers's encyclopaedia (chosen simply as being the largest in my possession) is not of course tailor-made to fit an index consisting largely of French names; Painter's Marcel Proust, which shares so many dramatis personae with the Montesquiou biography, might have spread the load a little more evenly from page to page. A framework, however, modelled on a large general index can serve again and again—and has indeed already served again for Pasternak's Letters to Georgian friends—thus reducing the time needed for initial preparation from about an hour on this occasion to five or ten minutes each.
subsequent time. In any case, only one recto (Com-Con) remained virgin; and only 10 per cent of the versos were brought into requisition—the indexer’s equivalent of those authors’ ‘scriggles’ which, in E. M. Forster’s words, ‘surge up from the margin, they extend tentacles, they interbreed’—because no more interpolations were otherwise possible. The need for some emergency parking ground, as it were, was of course one of the two reasons why I began by using only the recto pages; the other was that it is considerably easier, mechanically, when thumbing to and fro, to have to write on rectos only.

Within each recto I divided the space by guess-work; and whether by luck or good management there was nearly always room where I needed it. In placing each new heading I took into account, of course, not only the number of further headings likely to precede or follow it immediately, but the likely number of entries under any heading. This placed a higher premium than usual on mental notes made during the reading stage—e.g. ‘remember Desbordes-Valmore and Deslandes, close together and each with quite a few entries’—and on an ability (which might surprise my correspondents) to write small but clearly when the occasion demands. In not one case was it necessary to number a group of misplaced headings before typing.

To anticipate an obvious question: I resorted to cards for entries under Montesquiou himself and for cognominal members of his family, which together accounted for a fifth of the index. The use of different-coloured cards, however (red for Montesquiou’s relatives, white for his characteristics, yellow for his books), combined with modification of the one-card-one-heading principle (thus one white card covered, just as a page in the notebook might have done, alphabetically-arranged characteristics from ‘intelligence’ to ‘pugnacity’), made the finding of headings and sub-headings on the few (23) cards almost as quick as in the notebook itself.

For the prime and tremendous advantage of the notebook over the card index is in sheer mechanical speed of operation, particularly at the entry stage. Moreover, whereas card indexes get more unwieldy the larger they grow, notebook entries take progressively less time as more and more headings are written in, and even the need for two seconds’ thought on the placing of a heading is eliminated. Even with plenty of guide-cards, it takes astonishingly much longer to find the right card, extract it, insert a marker (or partly pull out the next card to serve the same purpose), write the entry, and wonder perhaps whether to keep the card out for possible further use soon (a frequent minor dilemma) before re-filing it and removing the marker, than it does to flick to the page and write the entry, often—and one soon learns the short cuts, e.g. that Huysmans is one page back from I—almost in one motion. The notebook is also quicker than the file of cards, for obvious reasons, at the typing stage.

Other advantages of the notebook are compactness, portability, and the absence of such perils as upsetting the file or—more serious—mislaying cards. These advantages are particularly important when it comes to the checking of names that one’s personal library has failed to unearth, and more than compensate for the danger of jumping a heading or two when typing from a notebook; the latter error will come to light when the typing is checked against the original (at which stage a helper is even more essential than with cards), whereas a card or wodge of cards left in the Reading Room of the British Museum or London Library may well sink without trace.

The notebook method has its limitations, of course, and is clearly better suited to an index consisting predominantly of names than to one where headings are more liable to be changed or combined at a late stage, where sub-headings and sub-sub-headings are going to abound, or where for any reason a considerable amount of editing is likely to be necessary. (For the next book I
indexed, a symposium on Voting in cities published by Macmillan, it was clear that many headings would need to be sub-divided at least once, and so I reverted unhesitatingly to cards.) In general it has the disadvantages of inflexibility—which means that the indexer should know what he is doing before he starts. (One possible way of getting the best of both worlds might be to use a loose-leaf thumb-index notebook; though I guess that the loss of mechanical ease of reference would outweigh the gain in flexibility.)

One fundamental objection to the notebook method must be anticipated and answered: how, since one cannot shuffle and re-shuffle into page order of first unchecked entry, and back into alphabetical order, does one carry out the page-by-page checking of entries against the text which Collison takes for granted? At the risk of scandalising fellow-indexers and scaring off publishers and authors, I will boldly confess that this incredibly cumbersome (and therefore costly) procedure is one that I have always skipped: nobody who is incapable of copying a three-figure number correctly should be making an index at all.

Addendum

At the proof stage I have a sad little postscript to insert: the publishers of Robert de Montesquieu, I have just learned, returned the press copy of the page proofs without waiting for my (punctually delivered) index—which was accompanied by a list of some fifty names given wrongly or inconsistently in the text. There are thus numerous discrepancies between the uncorrected text and the index. This, of course, has nothing to do with the subject of my article; but having drawn attention to what could be mistaken (since not all the names concerned are household words) for a thoroughly careless index, I feel constrained to add this cautionary tale.


From M. D. ANDERSON

Mr. Stallybrass’s method of making an index in a notebook resembles in many ways Dr. Holmstrom’s ‘shingled sheets’ method, described in The Indexer, Vol. 2, pp. 26-30, and Vol. 4, p. 129. Dr. Holmstrom uses, not a notebook, but sheets of paper stapled together in bunches of ten, with each successive sheet projecting a quarter of an inch lower than the one on top; the caption for each page is written on the bottom right-hand corner. Mr. Stallybrass takes the groups of letters for the captions from an encyclopaedia, Dr. Holmstrom from an existing large index on the same subject, or from a dictionary of the subject. Both methods have the same advantages: (1) speed of operation; (2) portability; (3) economy of material; (4) no risk of losing an entry. Both provide for reserve space—on the verso pages of the notebook, or the left hand halves of the sheets of paper.

I have used the notebook method several times for short indexes, and find it satisfactory, though not perhaps as time-saving as Mr. Stallybrass would suggest. It would also be applicable to longer indexes involving perhaps only names, or other very short entries with few or no sub-headings. Where there are only a few long entries, as in Mr. Stallybrass’s index to the 270-page biography, his use of index cards for these alone extends the scope of the method. But when most of the entries in an index have sub-headings, and when many entries overflow on to two, three, four, or even more cards, and much editing is required, then the notebook method is not appropriate.

Mr. Stallybrass himself acknowledges the limitations of his method; within these limitations it can have a useful place in indexing procedure, and both Mr. Stallybrass’s and Dr. Holmstrom’s versions should find their way into books on the subject.
I agree with Mr. Stallybrass that Mr. Collison’s instruction to check back all index entries against the text is a counsel of perfection, and too time-consuming to be attempted in ordinary circumstances. But I find that the editing of a complex index does involve the incidental checking of many page numbers, for in the process of sorting the numbers of a long entry under suitable subheadings, it is often necessary to refer back to the text to be sure that the grouping is as logical as possible.

From DELIGHT ANSLEY, an American member

The best way to make an index is the way that the indexer finds most convenient. If the result is a good index, nobody will care whether it was made with a notebook, a computer, or knots in a piece of string.

A notebook might be practical for indexing a short biography such as the author describes. He understands that his method has limitations in dealing with larger books or more complicated subject entries. An obvious difficulty is that unless one could predict the amount of space which would be needed for every section of the alphabet, it would be hard to keep the alphabetization correct, especially with sub-entries.

For his last sentence the author deserves any medal that the Society of Indexers can give him. ‘What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed.’

From IVAN BUTLER

I was very interested in Mr. Stallybrass’s article, as I have used a method based on a thumb-indexed notebook myself for well over a hundred indexes of varying sizes, and have found no reason to change, except in special circumstances, to using cards or slips.

My own method is different in detail from that of Mr. Stallybrass, entailing the use of a foolscap size thumb-indexed book, and necessitating one extra item of procedure in respect of alphabetizing. Even so, I have found, as he has, that the time saved in the actual writing down of entries more than compensates for this. I use cards for an index where it is evident that there are to be a very great number of subject entries without many page entries to each.

In the matter of sub-entries, I usually find that by the time one starts the actual entering, one has a pretty good idea of those names or subjects which are going to require these, and I provide separate foolscap sheets for this purpose. If I have made a mistake, and find afterwards that there are entries which need sub-dividing and which I had not allowed for, it is a simple matter to look these up again (the entries are never very numerous) and divide them up as necessary. This also serves as a check-up.

Incidentally, there is one point in Mr. Stallybrass’s method about which I am not quite clear. He says that he sub-divides each letter roughly according to Chambers’s Encyclopaedia (B, for instance, having nine sub-divisions). Does he mean that, on coming across a B entry, he first thumbs to the B section of the notebook and then turns over to the correct page? Or has he in some way divided the graduated part of the sheet so that he can thumb directly on to the subdivision of the letter in question? My method, because it only entails dividing each letter into two parts, enables me to do this, thus saving further time in the first instance.

I should like also to bear out Mr. Stallybrass’s points about the convenience of compactness and, in particular, portability: also his argument against a loose-leaf thumb-indexed notebook. I tried this once and found that the loss on the swings—including temper at the thing’s clumsiness—more than outweighed any roundabout gain.

[Mr. Butler, in a postscript to his letter accompanying the above, says: The article brought to mind one point. I heard the other day of an indexer who entered each sub- or sub-sub-entry on a separate card, or slip. Is this usual? It would save a good deal of time in hunting out particular cards, I imagine, but the mass of material at the end (and the expense, if cards are used) must be pretty formidable!—Ed.]
From G. V. CAREY

I find nothing "heretical" in the method propounded by Mr. Stallybrass. The chief emotion that it has stirred in me is exasperation at my own dull-wittedness in never having thought of trying it myself. I can see, as he does, that there must necessarily be reservations: in particular, that the book to be indexed must be neither very long nor very recondite; also that the indexer should have had time to read the whole book first—desirable of course in all circumstances, but by no means always practicable.

I can see also, on the other hand, the possibility of an advantage in the notebook method additional to the advantages mentioned by Mr. Stallybrass. By pure chance, it suggests itself to me from my immediate circumstances—temporarily homeless and wintering in a hotel. Many an indexer no doubt finds himself, for one reason or another, separated from his familiar facilities and "apparatus" for, perhaps, some weeks on end, and may feel himself reluctantly obliged, in consequence, to refuse work that he would otherwise have welcomed. It is possible surely that, for some types of assignment at any rate, a thumb-indexed notebook might obviate such refusal.

My concluding reaction is: 'Would that I could myself be granted the opportunity of putting the Stallybrass Method to the test.' To which the obvious reaction of any reader who knows me must be: 'He's old enough to know better.'

From G. DIXON

My own experience of thumb-indexed notebooks for indexing has been limited to one or two very small index/catalogues for such things as gramophone records. On the face of it the method does appear to be too constricting and inflexible and, I would imagine, is usually so regarded. Incidentally, Mr. Collison does condemn this method—not in Indexes and indexing, but in his other book on the subject (R. L. Collison, Indexing books, Benn, 1962, p. 17). However, given all the reservations and qualifications that Mr. Stallybrass mentions, the method is not perhaps without its uses. It would not be suitable for an index which was either extensive or meant to cumulate; it would not do for an index which had a great many sub-headings; it would not be very practical in cases where a great deal of editing has to be done. Mr. Stallybrass very disarmingly covers all these points. Two further criticisms which may be brought and which he does not mention are (1) revision of the index would not be easy, e.g. for revised editions of the book, and (2) it is not clear how one copes with what librarians call 'tracings'—those internal notes and references that the indexer makes to remind him of related headings, e.g. if a concept is indexed under two separate headings, then the indexer often needs to remind himself of this fact.

I must confess that Mr. Stallybrass's admission about his failure to check his index against the text was mildly shocking. With all the meticulousness and accuracy in the world I am sure that the checking operation is still required. What I have often done in order to avoid filing and re-filing is to check the text from alphabetically filed slips. (I like to keep entries in alphabetical order from the beginning and therefore I usually finish the actual indexing with the slips in this order.) This means darting about from page to page of the text but in many cases this takes no longer than repeated filing.

On the whole then, bearing in mind its limitations, the method is one which the indexer ought not to ignore completely, but I do think that the qualities of flexibility and hospitality are more important in indexing and cataloguing than Mr. Stallybrass will allow. After all, he admits that he had to resort to cards himself for one-fifth of his index!
From NEIL R. FISK

No! At all events, not for indexing technical matter or collections of abstracts, and it is such work only that I have been concerned with; probably, also, not for any large book.

In the index to a technical book the entries as well as the headings must be in alphabetical order. This restriction—not frequently imposed upon their work by the indexers of biographies, memoirs, histories, etc.—makes the notebook method unsuitable.

It is almost impossible to 'jump a heading or two' when typing from cards, and 'one soon learns the short cuts' with cards, too. Far from obvious to me is it that typing from a notebook is quicker than from cards. All the cards will be in perfect order, but 10 per cent. of the rectos of the notebook will have various entries on versos to be watched out for. How much quicker, and why?

Some printers can still be persuaded to take clearly handwritten index 'copy', and cards can be mounted to provide 'pages', eliminating the typewriter. No printer would set type from a handwritten book with 10 per cent. of the pages written on both sides.

The risk of mislaying cards is admitted. The cardinal rule is therefore tripartite: not more than one card out at a time, never more than two out, never go away from the drawer even 'for a minute' leaving even one card out.

As to cost, 'cards' cut to 5 x 3 inches from typing paper by a printer would cost less than one-third of Mr. Stallybrass's 22/- and abolish at one stroke his complaint about bulk. Plenty of 'used' paper, unmarked on one side, is thrown away every day in offices: this can be guillotined to supply an unlimited number of excellent 'cards' without charge, or even 1 per cent. of waste, let alone 45 per cent.

'Five or ten minutes' for the initial preparation of the notebook after once using the 'framework' seems impossibly optimistic. Lettering 100 rectos each with (average) six letters (counting the hyphen) in 600 seconds works out at one second per letter, and is, I suppose, just barely possible including turning over the pages, but this could not include thumb-indexing 26 pages. Five minutes would be utterly impossible. Much better than 'guesswork' to divide the space is the alphabet: top quarter Boa-Bof, next Bog-Bol, Bom-Bos, and Bot-Boz.

I note without comment that even in the example, a smallish index (internal evidence suggests that the Montesquiou index contained fewer than 1,300 lines set in 7-point type) 'largely of French names' to a by no means big book, Mr. Stallybrass 'resorted to cards . . . for a fifth of the index'.

The claim that 'the tremendous advantage [over cards] is in sheer mechanical speed' can, I suggest, not be supported except by test, and I would back myself with blank cards, against Mr. Stallybrass with an untouched notebook, to finish compiling first. If clearly handwritten 'copy' were acceptable I should take 30 per cent. to 60 per cent. longer, but Mr. Stallybrass must add 100 per cent. for typing and checking typescript.

I entirely agree about the 'incredibly . . . costly procedure' commonly employed for checking entries. Only a spot-check need be run, but this is all the more necessary if a typescript intervenes, because, although we may be infallible copiers, very few people are infallible proof-readers.

'Nobody who is incapable of copying a three-figure number correctly should be making an index at all.' Again I agree with Mr. Stallybrass, but I would add that nobody who leaves in the British Museum 'a wodge of cards' containing the results of his professional work is fit to be out by himself.

From GEOFFREY C. JONES

Some years ago I used this method of indexing successfully on several small indexes. However, as soon as I tried it on a larger index, I was less pleased with the results. The use of a large book meant much time spent in breaking down letters to subdivisions and thumbing through many pages. Secondly I found it difficult to estimate in
advance sufficiently accurately which were going to be the long sections and just how long they would be. Over-estimation resulted in wasted space and too many pages to thumb through and under-estimation in a horrible muddle needing to be re-written on a separate sheet of paper.

Finally, probably because I had a run of larger indexes, I discarded the system and have not used it since. I would not now go back to it simply because I prefer to use a uniform system applicable to any book, irrespective of its size or complexity. However, there is no doubt that the method can be successful for a short index. How short probably depends on the indexer's patience, temperament, and the size and neatness of his handwriting.

From G. NORMAN KNIGHT

I do not think that there is anything very new or 'unusual' about Mr. Oliver Stallybrass's method of indexing by means of a thumb-indexed notebook. I used notebooks for this purpose in the case of some of my earliest indexes—over forty-five years ago. Nor can there be any objection to this method for a comparatively small index, especially after Mr. Stallybrass's careful and elaborate system of preparation. But for one that is analytically compiled in depth and which will occupy forty or more columns it might prove quite impracticable.

While it may not be referred to in Indexes and indexing, Mr. Collison does devote a longish paragraph to thumb-indexed notebooks on page 17 of his later Indexing books (1962). He does not recommend them, except for a very small index or for preliminary work—especially while travelling—on larger indexes, but he adds: 'Some highly experienced indexers have made a success of this method'.

My own preference for cards is due to the fact that, if carefully and legibly inscribed and punctiliously edited, they can be used as 'copy' for the printer, whereas the notebook index will in every case require a fair copy to be typed, thus involving extra time and/or expense, although it is true that, if the typing is done at home, some of the editing can also be carried out in the process.

From A. B. LYONS

As to the 'method' revealed, it seems to me to demonstrate what I have always felt—that indexers should be prepared at any time to use their respective loaves and should not consider themselves bound by text books on indexing or by any conventions.

I have not myself ever used Mr. Stallybrass's method but I should like to tell you of one I adopted during the war. I was engaged on indexing the Annual digest of public international law cases and I was travelling by train between London and the north of England (in the blackout, may I add). I took with me the galley proofs and tore off the six to eight inches of blank paper at the foot of each. I clamped these pieces together with a bull-dog clip and at the top right-hand corner of each I wrote the letters of the alphabet. I knew where the 'heavy' entries—'diplomatic immunity', 'treaties', and so on—would fall. Subject to that, I divided each page into quarters or sixths, marking them Ba, Be, Bi, Bo, Bu, By, etc. And then I set to work.

When the job was finished, I handed the sheets to an expert secretary whom I had married a few years previously, and, with the aid of my 'squiggles' and one or two of her own, she very soon reduced the whole thing to a beautiful set of typed pages ready for the printer.

No checking back of entries against the text, I am afraid. But then, I don't think it was—or should be—really needed.

From ROBERT J. PALMER, an American member

I once started to make an index in the way suggested by Mr. Stallybrass, did a couple of chapters, but then decided to finish on 5 x 3 cards. Perhaps this was not a fair
trial of the method, but indexing with cards seemed to fit my temperament and working habits better.

However, there is one situation in which I would choose the method of Mr. Stallybrass. That would be if I had to compile an index while travelling and planned to work in airplanes, trains, or hotel rooms.

But in such a case I would prefer a small loose-leaf notebook to a bound notebook. One could thumb through a loose-leaf notebook just as quickly, and the possibility of inserting blank sheets would ensure flexibility. It would even be possible to create a rather complex index. For example, in indexing a biography in which one wanted to make a rather detailed analysis of the biographee, one could prepare loose-leaf sheets for the biographee with such sub-headings as ‘childhood of’, ‘education of’, ‘works of’, etc. Sub-subs could be entered directly on to such sheets.

Incidentally, Mr. Collison mentions the loose-leaf notebook on page 41 of his Indexes and indexing.

Under less itinerant conditions, the use of 5 x 3 cards would be the method of choice in the ‘present state of the art’. However, the secret of indexing at speed with 5 x 3 cards is not to stuff the box too full. Mr. Stallybrass complains of the difficulty of finding cards in a file, of extracting them, and of inserting markers. The point is that the indexer should always leave a fair amount of play in the box of cards with which he is working. A box designed to hold a thousand cards should never in the working stage contain more than six or seven hundred, even if it becomes necessary for the indexer to start a new box. When cards are relatively loose, the indexer can thumb rapidly through them, and the place from which he takes out a card automatically remains open. There is no need to insert a marker. One can work speedily and efficiently with 1,800 cards in three boxes, but it is impossible to do this with 1,800 cards in two boxes. On the other hand, of course, the cards should not be so loose that they fall down under one another.

Also, in order to work the cards speedily and efficiently it is necessary that the surface on which the cards rest be not too slippery. The open metal trays that are sold commercially for this purpose are generally too highly polished, and the cards dance around on the bottom like proverbial donkeys on ice. The surface on which the cards rest should be somewhat rough. A wooden or cardboard box is best.

From Wg. Cdr. R. F. PEMBERTON

I have read Mr. Oliver Stallybrass’s article, ‘An Unusual Method of Making a Book Index’, with much interest. He makes out a very good case for his system; and he should, in my opinion, be able easily to sell refrigerators to Esquimaux (particularly as, I believe, they use the things to keep their food warm).

I have heard of the system before—from an author who indexed one of his own books, a historical work. Even so, I do not feel inclined to try it myself. I use slips of fairly stiff paper (which are better than cards because they are more flexible and do not stick together), and I am perfectly happy with them. The great merit of the slip (or card) system is that it is infinitely flexible and adaptable; and a final run through before typing ensures that the slips or cards are in the right (alphabetical) order. Another merit is the fact that some printers will accept typed slips or cards instead of typed quarto sheets; I had this experience with two quite large indexes recently.

My slips cost about £1 10s. 0d. for 2,000 (including purchase tax and postage); and I use most of them four times each (top and bottom of front and back), using different coloured inks to avoid confusion. Only those slips which carry long multiple entries (with sub-headings) are not available for top and bottom use; but these have clean backs which can usually serve twice.

To revert to the Stallybrass System, while I appreciate its advantages for small and simple indexes, I feel that it would not be
suitable for a large or complicated one. The slip or card system works very well in all circumstances and is the only one suitable for large and complicated indexes. As I said, it is infinitely flexible and adaptable. And Mr. Stallybrass himself rather gives the game away by admitting that he reverts to cards or slips for the principal and 'cognominal' entries in indexes of biographical works, which introduces another complication: the use of two systems for one index. Incidentally he might use a small supplementary notebook for these entries.

With Mr. Stallybrass's last paragraph one cannot but agree. If the Society of Indexers should ever have occasion to call upon its members to work to rule, no doubt observance of the rule of page-by-page checking of entries against the text would be enough of itself to cause the requisite frustration and delay. Meanwhile, like many of the railwayman's rules, it would seem in normal circumstances best to keep it in the rule-book and exercise a blind eye.

From F. H. C. TATHAM

I do not feel that Mr. Stallybrass need fear denunciation for heresy, since I know at least one experienced indexer who adopts a similar method of making a book index, also based on a notebook, and no doubt there are others. In any case, it seems to me that if he finds that it works well with him, he would be wise to stick to it. It is probably only mental laziness and conservatism which prevent me from experimenting with the method myself.

I think however that Mr. Stallybrass is probably wrong, when he compares the speed of operation with notebooks and card indexes, in assuming that those who use cards normally take out an individual card from the file, make an entry and put it back again. One normally adopts some such method as the following: look through the chapter or section of the book which one intends to index that evening. Note the entries which are likely to arise, extract them from the file before starting to index and keep them on the desk in front of one. At the end of the evening sort these cards back and refile them. This method avoids the constant pulling out and putting back of the same card. Very occasionally one writes out a new card and finds that it duplicates one already in the index. But the time saved makes this risk of occasional time wasted worth chancing.

From JOHN L. THORNTON

The method described is probably one of the most primitive employed, and is still used by some indexers, chiefly amateur/author/indexers. I believe it was mentioned by Sir Steven Runciman in a talk to the Society in 1958 or 1959 as being the method he employed. It can be useful in compact, straightforward indexes, but can seldom save time in the long run. Marking up the pages with letters of the alphabet, scrambling through these for each entry, and finally typing them, must take more time than writing each entry on a slip, without attempting to find headings requiring added entries, but leaving this for the editing after final alphabetization, and then submitting the slips to the printer. All good printers accept legibly written slips, adequately marked and numbered. This saves time taken in typing them out and then checking the result. Mistakes are minimised, the work is expedited and the cost to the publisher/author is lessened, because the cost of typing should be extra to the indexing fee.

I agree with Mr. Stallybrass that no worthwhile indexer should find it necessary to check every entry page-by-page. Furthermore, few indexers, particularly in highly-specialised subjects, find it possible to read through the text of a book before attempting to index it—another useless rule so often laid down!

The chance of losing cards and slips by removing them from the sequence is completely avoided if queries are copied on to
separate sheets. But carelessness should be minimal among indexers, whose work demands constant concentration and the patience of angels. Indexers must number among their ranks a large number of fallen angels, and if I were to be numbered among them, so far it would not be for misplaced slips!

From R. WELLSTOOD, an American member

My first comment on reading the article by Oliver Stallybrass is, in my experience, that very few indexers have an opportunity to read a whole book before they have to prepare the index. Normally the indexer is deluged with galley proofs and the printer wants the index back yesterday or even sooner. Rarely does one get a complete set of proofs, thus having an opportunity to read the whole book before starting the index.

As far as having to pull out cards continually is concerned, as one goes along one gets to know the ones that are most likely to be in greatest demand, and these are usually kept separate and close to hand so that the complete index does not have to be searched for one particular card.

While working as a librarian I inherited a master book index in loose-leaf form. This was very handy for quick reference, but the amount of re-typing that had to be done when a number of new books came in was hardly worth the trouble. I really felt the work after a trip to England and the purchase of 100-odd new books to fill in gaps in the library.

A notebook would be fine for, as the author says, someone who remembers all that has to be indexed, but certainly would never work from scratch.

Also, as Mr. Stallybrass says, he was lucky and everything came out right. May he always be so lucky; I am sure we would like to hear how he makes out in future indexes.

A. R. HEWITT, a Vice-President of the Society, writes after reading the proofs of the foregoing contributions:

I have read Mr. Stallybrass’s Unusual Method with interest. I agree with those of the other commentators who suggest that if he finds the use of a notebook the best method for his purpose so much the better but I cannot see that it saves much time in the long run. This, and other short cuts (e.g. typing on gummed slips and sticking down afterwards) have little to commend them over the ‘old fashioned’ method of writing slips or cards and alphabetizing them at the end and not necessarily progressively when working under pressure. My wife (who is an expert assistant sorter) and I must have developed some kind of second sight, as it were, in rapid alphabetizing because neither of us find it the time consuming and difficult task that some others seem to do; there is, I think a tendency to make heavy weather of it.

Mr. Stallybrass’s method might be of some use in the case of simple indexing, but it would be quite impossible in the specialist field, especially where many sub- and sub-sub-headings are essential.

He, and some of the others, mention subsequent typing of the index and I have always wondered why indexers allow themselves to be bamboozled into doing this chore, usually without additional reward. In some forty years of indexing (a period during which I have indexed some 120 or more works) I have never agreed to do more than provide written slips. Further, I would not accept a commission which required a typed index.