The origin of indexes

Indexes must have had their origin in the tables of contents which were fairly frequently to be found in mediaeval manuscripts. Their alphabetical arrangement came into use—very slowly—after the European invention of printing in the middle of the 15th century.

The name ‘index’ itself, which had been used in this sense by Cicero, had a long struggle to oust such competitive synonyms as not only ‘table’ but also ‘calendar’, ‘catalogue’, ‘inventory’, ‘register’, ‘summary’ and ‘syllabus’. Shakespeare in his Troilus and Cressida (Act I, Sc. 3), 1609, writes:

And in such indexes, although small pricks To their subsequent volumes, there is seen The baby figure of the giant mass Of things to come at large.

[The italics are mine.] H. B. Wheatley remarks regarding this passage that Shakespeare has established for all time the correct literary plural form. We must therefore leave the Latin ‘indices’ to the mathematicians.

Some early indexes

Four years ago I was able to inspect some ancient indexes in the British Museum, through the courtesy of the Superintendent of the Reading Room (incidentally the present Chairman of the Society of Indexers).

The earliest indexed book I could discover was Provinciale seu constitutiones Angliae by K. Lyndewoode (1525). The index, which is entitled ‘Tabula’, is, like the text, in Latin and no page references are provided. The entries are in alphabetical order but the whole thing is more in the nature of a table of contents.

Very interesting examples I found in the two editions of Urbinatis Anglicae historiae by Polydore Vergil (1546 and 1555), both beautifully bound and produced. The index to the latter one, which is dedicated to the reader (‘Index hic tibi lector Angliae’), occupies no fewer than 31 pages and is in Latin, like the text, with an occasional Greek word. The entries are given in strictly alphabetical order, except that the archbishops of Canterbury (under the heading ‘Cantuarii’) are arranged chronologically. What is more remarkable, after each page reference there is shown the actual line number on the page on which the item appears. The index user is not, alas, similarly pampered nowadays.

Similar consideration for the user is shown in John Speed’s The history of Great Britaine (1611), where the ‘Index or Alphabetical Table’ refers inquirers not only to the text page numbers but also to the section numbers in each chapter. The order again is strictly alphabetical, but I noticed that the Monastery and the Battle of St. Albans both occur under Alban, whereas we should place them today under Saint. Another odd practice in this index is that the names of persons when used as keywords are not inverted.
Thus we have in the Bs:
Roger Baldock, Bishop of Norwich
Walter Baldock, Prior of Laund
None the less, both this and Polydore Vergil's are remarkably useful indexes.

The index to The naturall historie of C. Plinius Secundus, translated by Philemon Holland (1601), was the earliest that I came across in the English language. This has a heading: 'Haire shedding, how to be retained and recovered' followed by no fewer than 40 page references in solid unbroken rows. The next entry is 'Haire of mans head medicinable' and there are sixteen other main headings starting with 'Haire', the alphabetical arrangement going sadly astray.

The pillorying of Prynne

An early index of both historical and legal interest that I was able to inspect in the British Museum is that to Histrio-mastix: the players scourge by William Prynne (1633). Had the author, described as 'an utter-Barrister of Lincolnes-Inn', confined himself to writing the text, which is practically unreadable, he would not have landed himself in the pillory and been deprived of both his ears. But he was so proud of his invective against stage plays that he compiled a full and florid index of 40 pages, four of which he devoted to his idol, Bishop Hooper, whose sermons and letters are there quoted at length. It was entries like the following one (which I have actually abbreviated) that were Prynne's undoing:

'Women-Actors notorious whores... and dare then any Christian women be so more than wborishly impudent as to act, to speake publicky on a stage perchance in man's apparell and cut haire here proved sinful and abominable in the presence of sundry men and women? ... O let such presidents of imprudency, of impiety be never heard of or suffered among Christians, 385'.

This was scarcely a tactful utterance at a time when Charles I's Queen, Henrietta Maria, was preparing with her court ladies to act in a pastoral, and when Prynne was prosecuted in the Star Chamber Attorney-General Noy took care to quote the above and other similarly breathless outbursts from the index. He was sentenced to the savage penalties I have mentioned, together with a fine of £25,000 (the equivalent of at least £250,000 in today's currency). Justly, some might think, not because of the index's contents but for its proximity.

It is interesting to note that this must have been about the first occasion on which an indexer used preliminary notes (so often and usefully employed in modern substantial indexes) to explain the meaning of abbreviations, symbols or other devices occurring in the index. Thus, Prynne supplies a note: 'p. signifying the page, f. the folioes from pag. 513 to 545 (which exceeded the Printer's computations), m. the marginall notes ...'.

18th century indexes

Hitherto indexes to books had been compiled mainly by their authors. The 18th century saw the advent of the professional indexer. He was usually of inferior status—a Grub Street hack—although well-read and occasionally a university graduate. We get some idea of his condition in life from a passage in Dean Swift's pamphlet A further account of the most deplorable conditions of Mr Edmund Curll, bookseller, since his being poisoned on the 28th March (1716):

'At the laundress's at the Hole in the Wall in Cursitor's Alley up three pair of stairs... you may speak to the gentleman, if his flux be over, who lies in the flock bed, my index maker.'

Again, in Oliver Goldsmith's Citizen of the world (1762) a certain pretentious character is contemptuously dismissed as one who 'writes indexes to perfection'. Although he may have ceased to dwell up three pair of stairs at the Hole in the Wall, it may be worth remarking that up to quite recent years the indexer always tended to be the Cinderella of the British publishing world.

In 1737 appeared that great index, Cruden's concordance. Although Alexander Cruden was not the first (by nearly two centuries) to publish a concordance of the Bible and although he himself was so eccen-
tric that he had to be confined at times in a madhouse, his work after 230 years is still in daily use.

Samuel Johnson's famous *Dictionary of the English language* was published in 1755. Robert L. Collison points out that Cruden indexed only the Bible—Johnson indexed the English language itself. To assist him he employed six 'scribes', or professional indexers. It was Dr. Johnson who asked his friend Samuel Richardson, usually regarded as the first true English novelist, to add an *Index rerum* to *Clarissa*, and Richardson complied in its third edition (1751). Four years later he published as a separate work what is described in the preface as a 'General Index both of Maxims and Reflexions' for *Pamela, Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. This is not the place to discuss whether or not novels should be provided with indexes.

During this century analytical indexing of subjects had grown to a peak that is rarely approached today and the habit arose of making a study of the index serve as a substitute for reading the entire text. Thomas Fuller (1608-61) had previously written about 'indicical learning' and now Alexander Pope was to deride the practice in his *Dunciad* (1728):

> How index-learning turns no student pale,
> Yet holds the eel of science by the tail.

The indexes to British Government publications have almost invariably borne a very high reputation, largely due no doubt to paying a satisfactory rate of remuneration. We learn that in 1778 a total of £12,000 was voted for indexes to the (pre-Hansard) Journals of the House of Commons. The items of this amount, as quoted by Wheatley, were:

> 'To Mr. Edward Moore £6,400 as a final compensation for thirteen years labour; Rev. Mr. Forster £3000 for nine years labour; Rev. Dr. Roger Flaxman £3000 for nine years labour; and £500 to Mr. Cunningham.'

Other government indexes that have proved their usefulness down to the present day include those to: the excellent series of *Calendars of state papers*; Parliamentary papers (although several important 'Blue Books' have unaccountably made their appearance unindexed); 'Hansard' and the *London Gazette*.

**Indexing in the 19th century**

By 1800, indexes had greatly improved both in quantity and quality. The 7th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Edinburgh (1827-42), included as its 22nd volume a separate index to the whole. Its great rival, *Chambers's encyclopaedia*, followed suit in 1874, as have other similar publications since. Some publishers of the cheaper cyclopédias continue to shuffle out of their responsibility for providing an index under the pretext that the articles are already arranged in alphabetical order of their titles. But the fact is that an index is more vital in an encyclopaedia than in almost any other work of reference. Thus, for instance, while the *Britannica* has a long article on GREAT BRITAIN in the text, its index entry on that country comprises nearly five columns containing references to a mass of information in related articles throughout the 23 volumes. As Collison points out: 'For the great majority of its users the encyclopaedia is a poor tool without its index'.

In the preface to his *Lives of the chief justices of England* (1849-57) the 1st Baron Campbell, who was himself at different times Lord Chief Justice and Lord Chancellor, made his famous declaration:

> 'So essential did I consider an index to be to every book, that I proposed to bring a Bill into Parliament to deprive an author who publishes a book without an Index of the privilege of copyright; and moreover to subject him for his offence to a pecuniary penalty.'

Alas, no such legislation was ever enacted. Also Lord Campbell confesses that he himself had previously sinned.

In 1877 Dr. Wheatley and some fellow enthusiasts founded the Index Society (not to be confused with the present Society of Indexers) with the laudable aim of providing indexes for important works that had been published without any. It performed some valuable work and published a variety
of indexes (1879-91), notably the fine index to Sir George Trevelyan's Life and letters of Lord Macaulay (1876) compiled by Perceval Clarke in 1881. Unfortunately it failed for lack of support; Wheatley considered that its aim had possibly been too general. Had it been confined to history and biography, it might have been more successful.

Other excellent examples published during that century include The analytical index to the works of Jeremy Bentham (1843), compiled by J. H. Burton, George Birkbeck Hill's index to his own edition of Boswell's Life of Johnson (1887)—the Life (1791) had originally been indexed in characteristic fashion by the biographer himself—and the index to Wheatley's edition of the Diary of Samuel Pepys (1893-9).

The 20th century

In the present century authors, publishers, the reading public and literary critics alike became more index-conscious, and the last-named have come to point out frequently in their reviews the absence or deficiencies of an index.

The three outstanding events in the British indexing world took place in the second half of the century. They were the foundation of the Society of Indexers in 1957, the institution in 1961 by the Library Association of the Wheatley Medal for an outstanding index of the year and the publication of the British Standard Institution's Recommendations for the preparation of indexes (B.S. 3700: 1964). The second and third were largely the result of the first.

The Society of Indexers, which started with about 100 members, has now trebled that number and some 35 reside in the United States. It has the following aims: to improve the standard of indexing; to provide a liaison with authors, editors and publishers for the supply of qualified indexers and to advise about remuneration; to publish or communicate books and papers on indexing; to raise the status of indexers.

As regards the penultimate aim, while the Society has not so far got down to publishing an index for any important work originally issued without one, as did the old Index Society, it has from almost the start published every half-year its own journal, The Indexer, consisting of an average of 48 pages and containing a number of weighty articles, which are duly abstracted in Library science abstracts.

Among other useful activities, the Society promoted a Course of Training in Indexing in 1958, and since 1961 this in an expanded form has become an annual event.

The annual award of the Wheatley Medal for a book index of outstanding merit published in the United Kingdom during the preceding year was instituted by the Library Association in 1961. The qualifications and the adjudication are both strict and for three years none of the nominated books has been judged worthy of the award. Of the four indexers who have so far received the award no fewer than three have been the authors of the books concerned. In this connexion it has been suggested (possibly unfairly) that the author-indexer possesses a pull over his professional rival in that it is thought he can claim almost unlimited space for his index from his publisher. The first medal went to Mr. Michael Maclagan, Senior Tutor of Trinity College, Oxford, in respect of his index to his own work, Clemency Canning (1962). Undoubtedly by instituting the award the Library Association has succeeded in stimulating the production of good indexes.

The British Standard for the Preparation of indexes (1964) was the result of a suggestion made by the Society of Indexers. It followed (both in time and to some extent in essential recommendations) the American Standards Association's Z39.4 — Indexes (1959). The sub-committee that prepared the British Standard included four members of the Society of Indexers. The standard has certainly proved its usefulness in influencing indexers but already stands in need of slight revision, so that the sub-committee is about to renew its labours.
Among the many notably excellent book indexes that have appeared during the present century, mention may be made of the following: E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn’s edition of the Works of John Ruskin (index volume No. 39, 1912); Dr. L. F. Powell’s revision of Birkbeck Hill’s edition of Boswell’s Life of Johnson (1934-50)—the index is an improvement in many respects; the Centenary edition of The complete works of William Hazlitt, indexed by Mr. James Thornton (Vol. 21, 1934); Anthony Spalding’s The reader’s handbook to Proust: an index guide (1952), containing a rare example of an index to characters in fiction; Dr. Esmond de Beer’s index to Evelyn’s Diary (1955); and the facsimile edition of Richard Hakluyt’s Principall navigations (1965), which gained for its indexer, Mrs. Alison Quinn, a Wheatley Medal.

Considerable as has been the progress achieved during recent years, there are still, alas, far too many books published without the needed indexes or with only indifferent ones.

1 Henry Benjamin Wheatley, D.C.L., F.S.A. (1838-1917), a noted bibliographer and sometimes described as ‘the father of modern indexing’. His How to make an index (1902) is still one of the most valuable treatises on this subject.
2 The most that he can hope for today is such a device as that used in the Encyclopaedia Britannica index, where a small a, b, c or d after each page reference denotes in which of the four sections of the large page of the text the item is to be found.
3 Thomas Carlyle refers to Histrio-mastix as a book ‘still extant, but never more to be read by mortal’.
5 Students of such classics as Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1605) would undoubtedly welcome the assistance of an index. The late Evelyn Waugh possessed a fully indexed translation of Count Tolstoy’s Resurrection (1889), published in New York, while the present writer knows of a librarian who has compiled a comprehensive index to John Galsworthy’s complete Forsyte saga (1922).
7 A distinguished American lawyer, the Hon. Horace Binney, held the same views.

‘INDEXERS’—A DEPLORABLE CONFUSION

Elsewhere in this issue will be found a lively symposium on the use of marginal thumb-index notebooks in indexing. By an odd coincidence, by the very same post that brought the Editor’s invitation to contribute to this feature came another invitation, this time from a merchant in London, E.C.3.

The latter asked me to tender by return my lowest possible F.O.B. prices for the following, required in Iran:

‘300—Index, tabbed, size 8½ x 6" tab of ½" made from 130 Gr./Sq. M.
Colour: Yellow paper.
Lettering printed on white paper and covered transparent plastic.
Alphabetical “A-Z”.
For MESC General Index Binders.’

I ascertained over the telephone that, as I had suspected, the mistake arose through my name appearing under the heading INDEXERS in the buff London Classified Telephone Directory of Trades and Professions. What can be done to avoid this deplorable confusion and preserve our identity as professional compilers of indexes?

In The Indexer, Vol. 5, No. 1, page 27, I half jokingly suggested that we should revert to the old description of ‘index-makers’ (cf. Jonathan Swift’s ‘At the laundress’s at the Hole in the Wall up three pair of stairs, if his flux be over, you may speak to the gentleman who lies in the flock bed, my index-maker’). But on reflexion I have concluded that this term might prove even more ambiguous. What then can be done?

G.N.K.