INDEXING CHAMBERS’S ENCYCLOPAEDIA*

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The editions of Chambers’s Encyclopaedia appearing between 1858 and 1948 had no index. But the new Chambers’s for which I was responsible comprises a limited number of long main articles, many shorter articles dealing with the principal points of the main articles and a very large number of brief descriptive entries. Such a scheme seemed essential because one department of knowledge, investigation and thought constantly overlaps and impinges on another.

The special problems of such an index lead off with the simple matter of size. This particular Encyclopaedia has an index of about 200,000 references, some 400 pages, each page set in 4 columns of 7 point type. This is a lot of index. The second distinctive factor is the subject matter to be indexed. It is comprehensive. It embraces some 15,000,000 words covering as far as is feasible, recorded human history over 5,000 years, with the events and discoveries, the ideas and hopes of the human race. No neat little specialisms for the indexer here nor even a magnum opus, one scholar’s life work. The third distinctive point is the time factor. The time at the editor’s disposal, including the time taken by the printer and the dealing with galley and page proofs, was well under a year.

From these points flow a number of consequences. The index had to be made not by a single expert but by a staff of indexers of whom none (except the scientists and mathematicians) can be specialists. The organization and physical labour required to isolate, classify and distribute entries on specific intellectual disciplines (which after all appear on the page proofs in alphabetical order) is beyond contemplation, and secondly disciplines overlap and, therefore, the articles may well cover more than one sphere of interest. We therefore had to choose a staff of generalized intellectual capacity who could be taught the techniques necessary for this particular labour. For the most part our indexers were seconded from the editorial work they had been carrying out on the text.

An important consequence of having to use a team of indexers was that consistency of approach and of attitude of mind (if I may so describe it) to the weight and significance of items of information indexed had to be secured: and, of course, uniformity in the actual techniques of the operation.

Agreeing that the object of making a classified subject index is to turn the information in the Encyclopaedia inside out and to indicate the whereabouts of a vast range of information in a different and more specific form, this form, in addition to the obvious entries, titles of articles and the like, will embrace (1) different terms from those shown for the titles of articles; (2) specific items of information lumped together in the text under a general heading; (3) alternative terms, names or spellings.

The index has by no means been restricted to the listing only of persons, places and things. Subjects, topics and ideas as well as names, receive their full share of attention.

* A lecture given at a meeting of the Society.
It was also the policy to include as many entries as possible on those rather more obscure persons, who, buried in the folds of time and having no outstanding claim to fame, are perhaps not likely to be met with in other works of reference.

On the problem of what references to take out, the main criterion was whether the reference conveyed material information about the subject of the actual index heading: allusions incidental to some other subject had to be passed over. A useful rule-of-thumb we suggested was that, to be worthy of an index entry two hard facts must be given in the text, i.e., the reference indexed must contain two specific and concrete factual statements about the topic specified in the index heading. There being few rules, however, without their exception, it proved useful on occasion to relax this to one ‘hard fact’. Small references to matters or people not dealt with elsewhere in the Encyclopaedia are sometimes as valid for inclusion in the index as longish references to subjects also treated elsewhere. Bear in mind, we said, that as indexers cannot index from the text something that is not there, so the editors will not be able to collate into any sensible shape (a) cards that are not there; (b) cards which are in error; (c) cards which are in any way misleading or ambiguous. It is therefore better to write too much in the way of explanation on any card taken out than too little. It is better, generally speaking, to over-index than to under-index. Excess can be dealt with at a later stage; deficiency cannot.

Our indexers were reminded that they should also bear in mind allied subjects to the one under consideration. It is not always enough merely to index what is in front of one. Thus, an important reference to wheat in the article, say, on Agriculture should be indexed not only under wheat but probably under cereal and grasses (whether these words actually occur or not), as well as possibly under any names mentioned of leading wheat-growing countries, to be classified by the editors later under sub-section Agriculture of such country index headings. Similarly a discussion, for instance, in the article Drama on Shakespeare’s views on tragedy as exemplified in Hamlet, could well qualify for index entries under Shakespeare, Tragedy and Hamlet (but N.B.—NOT under Drama).

To pick out of the text the names of persons, places or things about which at least two hard facts are given is relatively easy. Nor is it especially difficult to think of additional but not of course synonymous headings under which the reference should also be made. It is more difficult to recognize a discussion or description of an idea, concept or general topic which the contributor may not have labelled with a definitive name. Such references have nevertheless to be identified and taken out. The choice of the heading under which such references are entered requires thought.

Two separate groups of entries dealing with the same subject, e.g., liberty and freedom, would never do. All such entries had to be brought together under the heading with a cross-reference from the other.

Such chosen names and their alternatives (as cross-references) were specially noted and made available for inspection by all indexers. When an article existed under one of the possible names, that name was preferred as the selected index heading and was if necessary cross-referred to from the others. This did not exclude, of course, that references to the subject might also be made under still other headings: e.g., under Totalitarianism. Special difficulty arose in the indexing of ideas in distinguishing between two related but not identical concepts, e.g., Absolutism and Divine Right.

We had to impress upon our indexing staff that a full, accurate and precise description was vital, as without correct identification of the person, place or thing later editing and proper collation would be impossible. There are several meanings of the one word ‘strike’ for example: each separate reference to ‘strike’ had to be gathered together and sorted at the final stage into its
proper category—the strike entries boiled down to four, plus two under 'striking'. Again, in the index to the 1950 edition, there are four separate entries on 'cat': the island, the animal, the type of ship and as a military term. It is obvious that references in the text to the domestic animal accidently indexed under the island in the Bahamas will be misleading to say the least.

Similarly, with 'modifications' it was important to be accurate, pinpointing the nub of the matter under discussion, dating treaties, battles, political events, inventions, scientific discoveries and the like; or otherwise indicating place and period of time. Thus there might be more than one reference in the work to Gladstone's attitude to 'the Turkish question'. With index cards properly filled in editors would be able to collate them under the appropriate modification and the reader who wished to know exactly what his attitude was would be able to find the reference immediately. Never sacrifice, we begged, clarity to brevity and avoid abbreviations, e.g., not, please, 'pol. in Pol.', but 'policy in Poland'.

The indexing of persons posed problems. The prime object was to identify the person named. It was really necessary to distinguish between, say, the various Charles II's (The Fat, of France, of England, of Epirus, of Naples, of Navarre, of Parma, of Spain, of Wurttemburg, of Brunswick, and, of course, the Holy Roman Emperor). Difficulties arose when an entry had to be taken from an article which gave insufficient data for easy recognition. This problem, which was incessant, necessitated our employing a number of research workers as adjuncts to the index team. All doubtful identifications were set aside and handed over to our researchers for pinpointing. This difficulty did not relate only to potentates. There is a dismaying tendency in scientific articles to describe the important work of Jones and Davies who are said to be the first persons to have isolated some vital something or other. Such eminent characters cannot be just pushed into the index under 'Jones'. Let us hope that the great man turns out to bear as a first name a really distinctive appellation.

Then there are the medieval polymaths who are known to the scientists under the name which may be Mohammed something or other and to the literary specialists under another, which may be Abdul something or other.

We may all recognize Buonarotti to be Michael Angelo or the earl of Beaconsfield to be Disraeli, but you really have to have your wits about you to equate Ab Aquapendente with Hieronymus Fabricis or Abu Raihan Mohammed with Al Biruni. There were also the people unknown to such ignorance as mine, with single names such as Toun, which turned out to be the name of a Japanese metal worker. How important it was to those who ultimately edited the index that the descriptions and dates should be full and accurate will be readily grasped if one looks at the index entries on Frederick which occupy well over a column and a half and start off with Frederick the Penniless and run through Frederick the Fair, Frederick the Wise, Barbarossa, of course, and Frederick the Great, moving on to the Frederick Augustuses, the Frederick Charleses, the Frederick Christians, the Frederick Henrys, to end up with Frederick William IV.

The accumulation of index entries for some countries was very large and for the main countries the index entries were classified. In practice I found it necessary to delegate the classification and editing of the entries on countries to one member of the index team to ensure a reasonable degree of consistency. I need not trouble you with any cries from the heart caused by those regions, countries and nations which have changed their boundaries, changed their names, changed their sovereignties, during the course of history. You will be able to imagine these for yourselves.

With books, pictures and music, the question arose whether to take out the names of
works of art and if so, which. Generally speaking, works taken out had to be important, historically or artistically;

The rule-of-thumb of at least two facts was strictly applied; and from biographies of writers, painters, etc., works were taken out very sparingly. But famous works by minor performers were favoured, e.g., Uncle Tom’s cabin.

Indeed, we made a real effort to index the names of well-known works the authors of which most of us are hard put to specify. Who of us could now remember off-hand the name of the writer of 'Rule Britannia'? James Thomson is better remembered for 'The Seasons'. Or for that matter who wrote The Star Spangled Banner? This became the national anthem of the United States by Act of Congress in 1931, 117 years after it was written by Francis Scott Key.

I have made no reference to the indexing of the scientific articles. One of the leaders of the team who undertook this specialised work is a member of our Society and I could not possibly venture to offer a word on this topic except to express, once again, my thanks for her expert labours and those of her colleagues, including Mr. Skelton.

The Encyclopaedia, indeed, was marvelously well served by its indexers. On the first round Mr. Laurance Fitch was in general charge and the late Mr. Hubert Fitchew’s team checked most of the galley proofs. And on the second round, Mr. Merton Atkins was in general charge, with Mr. Sandison added to the scientists.

JAMES THORNTON’S INDEX TO THE LETTERS OF CHARLES DICKENS

PHILIP WRIGHT

The late James Thornton’s last published work was his Index to Volume Two of the Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens (edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969). The compiler’s name does not appear under the heading of the Index, but the editors in their Acknowledgments express their gratitude to him both for the index and for much help and advice (as a member of the editorial committee for the series). Also a special Publisher’s Note, recording his death while the index was in proof, pays tribute to his contribution to the work. This contribution was sufficiently striking to win praise from reviewers. A review in The Times Literary Supplement (11 December, 1969) referred to ‘that often forgotten man, the indexer—in this instance J. C. Thornton, whose indexes to the first two volumes are another special merit of the edition’.

James Thornton discussed his approach to the task of indexing the Letters in a talk reproduced in this journal (Autumn 1965), v. 4, no. 4), and he obviously had it in mind when writing his article on ‘The Long Index’ in the recently published symposium, Training in indexing. To members of this Society, it may seem hardly necessary to add that this large-scale index is a work of impressive stature: immensely thorough, expertly planned, and stamped with the scrupulous