INTRODUCTION TO BOOK INDEXING

M. D. LAW*

Introduction

For the betterment of men's condition, the world today, as a thousand years ago, has two basic needs: wealth and knowledge. Even the most compassionate and generous, the most highly skilled administrator, cannot share out what does not exist, and the most brilliant intellects cannot apply powers of reasoning and imaginative deduction to information they do not possess.

It is not for us to consider how to increase wealth. But it is for us to consider how to increase information—or rather to make it increasingly available. We all acknowledge the need for information and for spreading it about: books, films, radio, television, strip cartoons, teaching machines, learned transactions, blue books, white papers, reports of commissions, even opinion polls, all profligate—'Communication', used no doubt in a variety of meanings, is indeed, one of the great vogue words.

Rôle of the Indexer

In the task of spreading, communicating information and perhaps, who knows, of even increasing it, the rôle of the indexer is, I often think, insufficiently recognized. The work is certainly all too often inadequately remunerated. I cannot encourage you to believe you will directly add to any substantial increase of personal wealth. But you may indeed be lending an indirect hand, your little personal push, to the better grasp of events and ideas and thus to the improvement of human understanding.

An Index: its essential purpose

You will forgive me, I hope, if in now turning to consider the essential purpose of an index, I begin at the beginning and discuss, in too elementary a fashion, concepts and techniques with which you, or some of you, are already familiar. But it may be useful, I hope it will be, to think again about such matters.

In the first place, the purpose of an index is to re-organize the information in the book (or other printed material) to turn it inside out, as it were. The information has to be broken down, and re-assembled into its component parts. These components have then to be collated and arranged in a form at once planned and consistent and therefore easily consulted.

An index is not a table of contents and must never be confused with one. A table of contents is a summary of the author's plan of his book, how he has chosen to present his theme in the most interesting and thoughtful way. An index is the indexer's plan of the information given by the author, how the indexer is re-presenting the author's material in the most convenient way.

Qualifications for an Indexer

There are several attributes the possession of which will make life easier for the intending professional indexer. High among them is an orderly mind, the kind of mind which tends automatically to sort and classify. If you put your things back where they belong, and where they belong is the logical place, this is the attitude. Next, one needs wide general knowledge and a passion for accuracy. You need not be a polymath or a computer. But you ought to cultivate that kind of background knowledge which rings

*The introductory lecture to the 1970 Course in Book Indexing.
a bell when you encounter a phrase, event, person only barely familiar and not really comprehended; warning you that although you may not know, there is something there that ought to be checked. Thereupon, without enough context, the Sublime Porte, the Eastern Question, Batavia, should, unless you happen to know, at least remind you that the first had to do with Turkey, the second did not begin with Zionism, and make you query which Batavia—the island of the former Dutch empire or the short-lived republic of the Low Countries. People, too, can be pitfalls, especially politicians who become ennobled halfway through their careers; persons known by different names in widely separated fields of endeavour; and of course, the elegant alias.

It is good, also, to be a rapid reader; and unless you are expert with a typewriter and indeed even if you are, to have neat and legible handwriting.

Procedure for Beginners

May I suggest how absolute beginners should begin?

First, have a good look at the publication before you accept the commission, and do not accept as your first undertaking a work which may prove too vexatious, e.g. a series of philosophical essays, a work on economic or political theory, or a scientific work, unless you have a high degree of specialized knowledge. Nothing is more difficult to deal with than abstract concepts and ideas or technical jargon, especially if this happens to include a large number of ordinary words used in a highly technical sense.

Secondly, find out from the publisher the proposed length of index, number of pages, size of type, number of columns per page, and thus the number of headings and references.

Then set to work

Start by reading or thoroughly scanning the whole book, noting the scope of the subject matter and its treatment, e.g. whether chronological or by topics or themes.

Secondly, relate the number of references available to you to the number of pages in the work, thus discovering how many references per page you can take out on average.

Supposing it is a shortish work, say 222 pages of text. The index is to occupy 5 pp., each of 2 columns. The size of type used will permit a maximum of 47 headings per column. This would be a maximum of 470 headings in the finished index, each heading with no more references, i.e. page numbers, than would fill the line of type, say 4 or 5 references per heading. You cannot however allow for this; you have to allow one blank line of space between each letter of the alphabet; you have to reckon that a proportion of headings will carry more than four or five references and thus occupy two or more lines; and you may need to subdivide some headings into classifications. I suggest you allow two-thirds or possibly three-quarters as many headings as the maximum, i.e. instead of 470, say 300 plus.

Now for the references (or page numbers). These may average, say, five or six per heading, allowing for headings that have only one reference and those which have six to twenty. Say you allow 150 references (or page numbers) per column. This means 1,500 references for 222 pages of text or about six per page.

Third, start reading carefully, underlining the items, persons, places, events, ideas and topics you propose to index.

As you go, write out in ink (or type) a card or slip for each item, the heading in the top left-hand corner, followed by a description which will identify the heading. In the middle put the modification, i.e. the word or phrase which points to the particular aspect of the heading, and in the bottom right-hand corner (but give yourself space) insert the page number.

Two important points must be borne in mind. Do not use two headings which are synonymous, with some references under one and some under the other; the synonym if included as a heading should be cross-referred to the chosen heading. Of course, make sure that the headings are synonymous and not merely similar. Also it will often be necessary to make two or more cards with
different headings (but the same reference) for one item, e.g. in a book about the drama, a discussion on Shakespeare’s views on tragedy as exemplified in *Hamlet* could well qualify for index entries under the headings ‘Shakespeare’, ‘tragedy’, and ‘*Hamlet*’. In a work on agriculture an important reference to wheat should be indexed also under the headings ‘cereal’ and ‘grasses’.

When you have finished and have your 1,500 or more probably 2,000 cards or slips they must be sorted into alphabetical order. They must then be edited. This means arranging all the references for one heading together in some planned order, page order, order of importance (when the subordinate references should be prefaced by modifications in alphabetical order) or classified.

**Equipment**

Start with the minimum—you will find as you go on that you develop your own habits of work and need equipment accordingly. A supply of cards or slips, soft pencils, a good india rubber, paper clips, rubber bands, and a small shoe box will serve you more than adequately. I do heartily recommend you, however, to provide yourself with a few reference books, e.g. *Whitaker’s Almanack*, a good dictionary, a printer’s guide to proof-reading and type sizes, and, if possible, a reliable encyclopaedia or at least easy access to one.

**Some Do’s and Don’ts**

**Do** take plenty of time for the initial planning—mistakes made here will never be retrieved.

**Do be accurate.** Never guess or rely on being virtually certain—check up.

**Do check up all queries before you put the cards into alphabetical order.** If you have been misled by an alias or pseudonym or an elevation to the peerage or one of several places with the same name, the query may be lost because it is in the wrong alphabetical place.

**Do train your memory.**

**Don’t**, I will repeat, enter different references to the same person, place, thing, event or topic under different headings. **Don’t** make references to similar things or topics under one heading. This is back to the Table of Contents fallacy.

**Don’t** over-index the first fifty pages.

**Don’t**, for your convenience in editing, skimp descriptions and modifications. This will help you too to prune the index at the very last to the required length.

**MACAULAY ON INDEXING**

from G. O. Trevelyan’s *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*:

Whenever one of his books was passing through the press, Macaulay extended his indefatigable industry and his scrupulous precision to the minutest mechanical drudgery of the literary calling. There was no end to the trouble that he devoted to matters which most authors are only too glad to leave to the care and experience of their publisher. He could not rest until the lines were level to a hair’s breadth, and the punctuation correct to a comma; until every paragraph concluded with a telling sentence, and every sentence flowed like running water.*

* Macaulay writes to Mr. Longman about the Edition of 1858: ‘I have no more corrections to make at present. I am inclined to hope that the book will be as nearly faultless, as to typographical execution, as any work of equal extent that is to be found in the world.’

On another occasion he says: ‘I am very unwilling to seem captious about such a work as an Index. By all means let Mr. go on. But offer him, with all delicacy and courtesy, from me this suggestion. I would advise him to have very few heads, except proper names. A few there must be, such as Convocation, Nonjurors, Bank of England, National Debt. These are heads to which readers who wish for information on these subjects will naturally turn. But I think that Mr. will on consideration perceive that such heads as Priestcraft, Priesthood, Party Spirit, Insurrection, War, Bible, Crown, Controversies, Dissent, are quite useless. Nobody will ever look at them; and if every passage in which party-spirit, dissent, the art of war, and the power of the Crown are mentioned is to be noticed in the Index, the size of the volumes will be doubled. The best rule is to keep close to proper names, and never to deviate from that rule without some special occasion.’