INDEXERS AND REVIEWERS
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Is it true that there are more references to indexes in reviews nowadays? One would assume that the Society of Indexers would hope so; and yet there are no data to offer in support of such a theory. All that we have to go on is our subjective impression and, indeed, the acquisition of evidence would require so much effort that the question might never be answered.

However, a comparison of the first six months' issues of the TLS of 1932 with the same periodical for the same period in this year does tend to confirm the trend even though these figures are, of course, so limited as to be inconclusive. In 1932 there were 484 pages and 56 comments on indexes; the 1970 figures are 696 and 93 respectively. Thus, whereas the volume has increased by 44 per cent, the number of index references has risen by 66 per cent. I shall leave it to others to produce the more significant figures that would be achieved by comparing the number of books reviewed rather than the number of pages.

But the surprising fact—surprising, that is, if one has given no thought to the matter—is that the nature of the comments has remained unchanged. This apparent stability encourages one to try to indicate certain categories into which the comments seem naturally to fall. Before embarking on this endeavour, I should emphasize the continuing fact that the vast majority of reviews contains absolutely no reference to indexes. To extrapolate from the absence of evidence is nearly always foolish but I should be acting out of character if I avoided the temptation.

If a reviewer does not mention the index (or its absence), I assume that it is because

(1) he believes that the index is adequate;

(2) he does not think that the book needs an index—this is, of course, essentially the same attitude as (1); or,

(3) he is not interested in the question. One fears that despite the encouraging statistics in the paragraph above, category (3) is still too common.

A profound knowledge of logic is not required to deduce that, if some books have indexes, then some do not. Of books in this latter class, it might be argued that they do not all require indexes; it is usual to say that works of fiction and ephemera do not suffer by the absence of an index, although there is a school of thought that would question this—especially in the case of long, classical novels. But many reviewers feel that the books that they are examining would be improved by the addition of an index. ‘An index would have added immensely to the value of the book.’ ‘It would have been improved by an index.’ ‘The book would have been better for an index.’

Some comments are rather more forceful. ‘The lack of an index is a serious drawback.’ ‘It is a serious mistake not to have provided an index.’ ‘It should certainly have an index, otherwise it is of little use.’

An air of bewilderment surrounds other writers of reviews; they cannot understand why no index is there and without it they find the book baffling. ‘Why has he not given us an index?’ ‘There is, unaccountably, no index.’ ‘The lack of an index tends to make one lose one’s bearings.’ ‘Clearness of impression is impossible and the failure to supply an index does not help us in hunting down elusive particulars.’

But the omission of an index is sometimes regarded only as a venial sin, especially if other features of the book are good. ‘There is no index but the illustrations are apt.’ ‘A few misprints and the absence of an index are small blemishes in a very able and stimulating book.’

Of course, the best criticism is constructive, and advice is not lacking. ‘A more clearly defined order of treatment and a simple alphabetical index would have made for easier reference.’ ‘His work needs a gen-
eral index with ample cross-references and a museographical register as well.’

So much for the absence of indexes; but is their mere inclusion sufficient? In many cases apparently one would have to answer yes, for the reviewer is happy simply to state that ‘there is an index’ or ‘the book concludes with an index’.

Although one reviewer might be content to say ‘a short index is added’, others are more demanding. ‘The index might with advantage be fuller.’ ‘Valla’s name should have been included in the translator’s index’ says one writer mildly, whereas another finds a ‘lack of gallantry’ in the omission of certain names, and a third is annoyed that the index is ‘highly inconvenient, inconsistent and confessedly incomplete’. My favourite criticism comes from one who finds the index ‘breathtakingly perverse’—perhaps with some justification as it is a Cyrillic index arranged in Latin alphabet-order. Other indexes are ‘shockingly hit-or-miss’, ‘extremely defective’ and ‘skimped’.

Errors in indexes have on occasion been regarded as ‘trifles which challenge criticism’; and surely a clerical error can be detected in ‘Sir Richard Hatton (index) was a priest and not a knight (cf. p. 224)’.

Besides the absence of indexes and the presence of adequate and less adequate ones, there are those which are quite satisfactory; the most common word to be encountered in connection with satisfactory indexes is ‘useful’ and after that ‘full’ and ‘comprehensive’. And surely to achieve these epithets is to achieve the indexer’s aim. Although some indexes might arouse the reviewer’s enthusiasm, as we shall see in a moment, no indexer should be dissatisfied if his work is found useful and adequate; and, moreover, it will be found that a competent index does all manner of nice things to a book. With an index a book becomes ‘complete and thorough’, ‘a treasure’, ‘reduced to order’ and ‘rounded off’.

Indeed, the provision of an index ‘marks the total seriousness of the author’s approach to his task’; and ‘there can be no reason to doubt the good faith of the author who has even supplied an index of subject-matters’.

Reviewers are not unaware of the indexer’s problems and they are ready to give a ‘special eulogy’ where it is due. ‘The index deserves a word of commendation, for it is not easy to comprise in eight pages so good a conspectus of a large book.’ ‘Most important there is a full and clearly arranged index.’

Apart from these main categories of index references there is the type that indicates the existence of more than one index. ‘There are three indexes.’ ‘There are several excellent indexes.’ ‘There are excellent indexes to authors, titles, printers, publishers and engravers’; and, still unsatisfied, the reviewer feels that ‘it would have been a great advantage had there also been an index to the various portraits referred to in the notes’.

A recurrent theme, in fact, is the demand for more indexes. ‘Unfortunately, there is only an index of names, though an index of compositions would have been welcome.’ I should not like to say whether this sort of comment is really a request for multiple indexes or for a single, fuller index. But I have the impression that a reviewer feels more confident in commenting on the existence of more than one index because it is a less usual occurrence than the single index; he feels justified because it seems more genuinely descriptive and critical.

More clear is the use that reviewers make of indexes in order to prove a point; the fact that they can be of this sort of usefulness should help to ensure that some reviewers continue to take an interest in the indexes of the publications that come before them. ‘It is significant that there is no reference in his index to such key subjects as “Constitution”, “Tutelage” or “Bill of Rights”.’ ‘One finds weaknesses and omissions, the most curious of which in a mid-century work must be the lack of either article on, or index reference to, sex.’ Remarks of this kind could not be passed with
the same degree of confidence in the absence of an index.

Sometimes the index is better than the text, sometimes it repeats the errors. ‘The usual name is Mimram—as shown in the index—not Maran.’ ‘The spelling does not appear to be a slip, since it is repeated in the index.’ ‘It is odd in a book intended for an English public to read, both in text and index, of Johannes Selden.’ ‘The messianic secret is mis-spelt in the index.’ This sort of comment highlights the indexer’s difficulty in deciding upon his final form of entry.

I think that one can fairly say that reviews reflect quite accurately the rôle and range of indexes. Even the preponderance of absence of reference is not dissonant with the general lack of recognition of the importance of good indexing even though this attitude might be diminishing. And yet it is encouraging that many reviewers do find it worthwhile to comment on the index even if their comments reveal a similar multiplicity of differing attitudes, interests, hobby-horses and abilities as are to be found amongst indexers themselves.

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL PERIODICALS

Two publications which some indexers may occasionally find useful have been published by the National Reference Library of Science and Invention (formerly the Patent Office Library but now a part of the British Museum) are: Periodical publications in the National Reference Library of Science and Invention. Part 1. List of non-Slavic titles in the Bayswater Division and Part 3. List of current titles in the Holborn Division.

Part 1 (25s. plus 2s. packing and postage) contains details of over 8,000 periodicals held. Part 3 (35s. plus 4s.) lists the holdings of journals covering industrial technologies, the sciences on which they are based, and the relevant abstracting periodicals, details of all the sets of patent specifications and of official patent, trade-mark and design journals. It contains details of over 10,000 different periodicals currently taken by the Holborn Division of the Library, all of which are readily available there together with years of back numbers, for study and research or as a source of photographs by post. This publication brings up to date and replaces the 1965 edition of Periodical publications in the Patent Office Library.

Part 2, including a further 2,500 titles held at Bayswater, from Slavonic and East European countries is to be published shortly.

Copies may be obtained from The Director (Publications), British Museum, London WC1B 3DG.

INDEX’S LACK A DISGRACE

Rebecca West was reviewing Farewell to the don: journal of Brigadier H. N. H. Williamson, edited by John Harris (Collins) in The Sunday Telegraph of 23 August, 1970. She ended her highly laudatory notice of this journal kept by Captain Williamson (as he then was) at the time of World War I with this damning piece of denunciation:

. . . this journal, against which there can be only one complaint. The editor, John Harris, is guilty of an important dereliction of duty. Captain Williamson has long been a Brigadier and is now 86 years old. It is not fair to bring disgrace on his white hairs by allowing him to publish such a book without an index.

But should not some of the blame be shared by the publisher?

G.N.K.

The history of the Wisconsin Synod, published in 1970, has the following entry in its index:

Wisconsin Synod, passim