Australia has one of the biggest book consumption figures in the world. The average Australian spends $A6 a year on books compared with $A4 spent by an Englishman. Books worth $A16 million were sold in Australia in 1969-70.

But only 30 per cent of the Australian market is met from domestic publishing.

Of 1,905 books published in Australia and received by the National Library of Australia (a copyright deposit library) in 1969, 566 classified as 'social sciences' included Bills and Acts of Parliament, 323 were classified as 'technology, business', 206 as 'science', 244 as school textbooks, and 291 as literature (mainly Australian fiction). This gives little scope for indexing.

The Australian publishers' (and indexers') troubles stem from the fact that our population of just over 12 million provides a limited market. The number of regular bookbuyers—those who buy twice a year—is a mere eight to ten per cent of the population.

So while book sales are booming here, publishers are in strife, and publishers tend to tailor their output to this limited market which limits profit margins.

And the index seems to be the first thing that publishers here try to reduce or dispense with when the cost of publishing a work becomes too high.

For this reason perhaps, most indexes in Australian publications are of poor quality, often containing inaccuracies and for the most part handling the subject concept approach badly, although most of them deal with names reasonably well. One gets the impression, nevertheless, that in general indexing has improved in recent years.

The situation in general

Some categories, as might be expected, are fairly well indexed. These would include law books, the official history of the war, and scholarly publications such as Plomley's Friendly mission (Hobart, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966), and the Royal Australian Historical Society's reprints.

More indexes are published than was the case twenty years ago, and although many works prepared by academics and authorities and publications of the university presses have fairly good and useful indexes, some books published by the scholarly presses contain indexes that are inadequate, uneven and unreliable.

Some reasonably scholarly works are published without an index at all. As an illustration, Herman's The architecture of Victorian Sydney (Sydney, Angus and Robertson) had no index in the first edition in 1956 but has one in the second edition published in 1963. Another example is Bethia Foot's Dismissal of a premier: the Philip Game
papers (Morgan), published in 1968 without an index.

One reason for deficiency of indexes here—indeed probably the main reason—is a simple lack of understanding that an index is of value and that there is an art in preparing it.

The writers of contemporary Australian non-fiction however seem to be more conscious of the need for indexes than they were, and are more concerned than the publishers. Nevertheless, the status of the qualified indexer is not adequately recognised yet. Among our most outstanding and intelligent authors one quite often finds the notion that they can slap up an index in a spare hour or two. Need I describe the result?

Official publications

It is still common to find official publications issued without indexes. In those publications which do have indexes, they vary considerably in the quality of indexing. Far too often indexes are prepared which meet the needs of the indexer but neglect the readers' needs.

On the other hand, the interest expressed by the New South Wales Parliamentary Library in the indexing of New South Wales parliamentary publications has greatly influenced the performance of the indexing carried out in the Office of the New South Wales Legislative Council. Publications issued by this Office are now thoroughly indexed and display an awareness for adequate references, recognition of synonyms, etc.

The Records of the Parliament, published for the most part as parliamentary papers, may be cited as good, even fulsome, examples.

There are still many deficiencies in indexing carried out by other official bodies: the official yearbooks are uneven, the Hansard indexes are often deplorable, and the indexing of royal commissions and committees of inquiry is variable or non-existent.

Too much is left to the individual indexer's personal discretion, but it is hoped that the creation of a centralised Australian Government Publishing Service will ultimately lead to some degree of standardization in the Commonwealth sphere.

On the other hand, in the State sphere, there is little sign of similar action and it remains a task of the library profession and of professional indexers to carry out the necessary educative function. This is where the Society of Indexers could help.

Commercially produced books

Among commercial publishers there are some who realize the importance of indexes and try to achieve a worthwhile result. One such publisher has expressed a view that is shared by others when he says that they have to balance the importance of the book and its possible sales against the amount of time which can be spent on preparing an index.

This publisher follows the practice of most other Australian publishers. The work is done within the organization or it may be done by the author. Sometimes one of the editors works with the author in preparing the index. If the book is considered to be of sufficient stature to warrant a detailed and comprehensive index, then a great deal of time is spent on the work. On some books this publisher spends as much as a month, with one or two people working full-time on preparing an index.

Another publisher has said that he feels it is important that a reader should have means of quick access to information in his books and that an index is a valuable tool for this purpose.

While it can be said that most serious books have adequate indexes, the majority of indexing in Australia is not done by professional indexers, but by authors, academics, or anyone designated by the author or publisher. The results are predictably uneven.

Those responsible in many cases demonstrate in the resulting indexes an inability to look at the subject from the reader's standpoint, to assess the headings under which the given topic is likely to be referred to or to ensure that such predictable references are covered. In all too many cases the selection
of items and the groupings is unhelpful, even ludicrous.

It is hard to see, however, how any substantial improvement can be effected in Australia while authors and publishers fail to recognise the technical skill involved in good indexing and continue to regard it as a mechanistic process rather than an art.

There are exceptions, of course. Of books turned out with good indexes may be cited Sidney J. Baker’s *The Australian language* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1945) which contains a list of words and phrases running into fifty pages (each three columns) and an index of ten pages (also three columns). Colin Bingham’s *Men and affairs* (Sydney, Currawong, 1967) and *The affairs of women* (Sydney, Currawong, 1969) are also supplied with fairly comprehensive indexes.

The scholarly presses make a feature of including satisfactory indexes in their works. Probably ninety per cent of books coming from university presses contain indexes that would be considered satisfactory by the readership.

Technical books published in Australia have a standard comparable with those published overseas. The depth of indexing varies with the coverage of the book. Historical treatments—company histories and subject histories—usually have excellent indexes, detailed to a high degree, and it has been noted that Australian works of this type are of a particularly high standard.

With historical and practical books—cooking, gardening, etc.—the indexes are usually done by the editorial staff of the publisher. Perhaps because of this, the quality is apt to vary.

Almost all legal books have indexes, many of them very detailed. This would apply also to textbooks for science, medicine and accountancy.

For these it is recognized that an index is essential and a good index is vital. Only too often a good text or practice book has not received the approbation it merited due to the failure of the index. Fortunately this is now recognized by the publishers of these types of books.

The practice of authors providing their own indexes is diminishing in this field, and the need for an expert or qualified indexer is becoming more and more recognized, whatever the subject matter of these professional books may be. The greatest handicap the author has when indexing his own book is that he has a greater knowledge of the subject than his readers and for that reason does not appreciate their needs when indexing.

As to quality of indexes, the demand alone for good indexes in these professional textbooks over the years has improved their quality.

The indexing policy of one publisher, which may be taken as typical of the best of the commercial publishers here, is to provide indexes in all books—general or educational—which are considered likely to be used for study or reference purposes. Where low-priced or popular titles are concerned an index may be budgeted for if it is felt that it will add materially to the usefulness of the book.

Minimal requirements by this firm call for all main themes to be listed, and for proper names and place names to be included according to their importance in the particular text. In specialist titles of a scientific or semi-scientific nature an effort is made to provide full taxonomical and technical indexes, to plates as well as text, giving Latin terms as well as popular usage. Finally the importance of cross-indexing is stressed.

Comments

Here in brief are the comments of a few of the many publishers, university presses and libraries—the makers and the users of indexes—who generously responded to my request for information.

PUBLISHERS: Australian Book Publishers’ Association—*The best here equal to anywhere else* . . . ; Heinemann Educational Australia Pty. Ltd.—*Uneven . . . lamentable* . . . ; McGraw-Hill Book Company Australia Pty. Ltd.—*More could*
be done to improve quality . . .; Paul Hamlyn Pty. Ltd.—Quality varies . . .; A. H. and A. W. Reed—Making marked progress . . .; Rigby Ltd.—Some might have been improved . . .; F. C. Judson, Publishing Consultant, formerly General Manager of Butterworths—Expert, qualified indexers becoming more recognised . . .

UNIVERSITY PRESSES: Melbourne University Press—In general, atrociously bad . . .; Oxford University Press, Australia—Quality varies, due to cost and competence . . .


To sum up

Much could be done to improve the quality of indexing in Australia. Many appear to be a bad selection of topics, not sufficiently comprehensive, and assist the reader very little.

An example of a fine book with a laughable index is Raymond Paull’s Retreat from Kokoda (Melbourne, Heinemann), published in 1958, but this kind of thing is still done today.

The university presses are doing their best to improve the situation. Most books published by members of the Association of Australian University Presses have indexes which are at least adequate.

The Australian War Memorial, publishers of the multi-volume Official history of Australia in World War II deserve a medal for the almost always exemplary indexing of these huge complex volumes.

‘On the whole the standard of the best indexing here is equal to indexing anywhere else,’ says G. A. Ferguson, Director of the Australian Book Publishers’ Association. The trouble is, there is not enough of this kind of indexing being done here at present.

Commercial publishers (some) issue books without them, or leave them to the author (hopeless); or fling them upon a staff editor as an additional unwanted and unpaid chore. But fortunately the long-held attitude of many publishers that the index was just something that had to be done, an additional expense, ‘so let’s get it over and done with’, is gradually disappearing as the index is seen as an integral part of the book, to be compiled with the same care as the text itself.

Publishers are coming to realise that—

Absente auxilio perquirimus undique frustra,
Sed nobis ingene indicis auxilium est.

Without a key we search and search in vain,
But a good index is a monstrous gain.

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Australian National University Press; Melbourne University Press; Sydney University Press; University of Western Australia Press.

The Commonwealth Department of Education and Science Library; Australian Institute of Management Library, Melbourne.

Library of Parliament, Melbourne; Library of Parliament, Sydney; Mitchell Library, the Library of New South Wales; State Library of Victoria; State Library of South Australia.

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