A haunting, I promise, for those who refuse to tell who’s who and what’s what*

Bernard Levin

Indexers are shamefully treated. Their pay is disgracefully low and they are hardly ever acknowledged in the book.

One of the things I am going to do before I die is to achieve the restoration of capital punishment for publishers and authors who put forth their works without an index, and one of the things I am going to do after I die is to come back and haunt those criminals who, through cunning, luck, a defect in the law or an abrupt flight from justice, have managed to evade the fate they deserve.

Note that I do not restrict my proposal to those responsible for works other than fiction, though I shall not insist on fiction being included in the measure from the start: novels will not have to be indexed until three years after my measure becomes law. But I can see no good reason for making a permanent exception for fiction, and I have always been surprised by the fact that I have never come across a voluntarily indexed novel. I have an edition of War and Peace with a fairly comprehensive list of the characters, including, most usefully, their patronyms, but that is the nearest I have ever seen, and the possibilities for novels are endless, starting with a service to the readers of the books of, say, Harold Robbins, who might well—indeed almost certainly would—be glad of an opportunity to go straight to the dirty bits without having to wade through the acres in between.

An index is so obviously essential a part of a book that I am amazed not only at the meanness and lack of professionalism displayed by publishers who take no steps to ensure a good and ample index, but even more at the ignorance or lack of pride in their work that makes so many authors indifferent in the matter. Nor does this apply only to slight and unscholarly works (not that it would be any kind of excuse if it did); many important and potentially valuable books are rendered virtually useless to scholars and the interested general reader alike by the provision of an inadequate index or no index at all.

I have always made a point, when reviewing a book that fails to pass this test, to include a paragraph of abuse of those responsible, and a fat lot of notice they seem to take, too. Some publishers are consistently bad about indexes, just as some are particularly careful—and these latter not only University presses, either.

But you have no idea, unless you have made a point, as I have, of inspecting the things carefully, of the number and variety of inadequacies indexes can have. There is, for instance, the kind that includes this sort of useless entry—and in many instances not merely includes it, but consists almost entirely of it:


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Not only are there many publishers who offer indexes like that, but there are some who, if they read this column, will not understand unprompted why such index-material is inadequate. Other publishers go even further in demonstrating their fitness for this scaffold; it is possible to find works, substantial both in size and in quality, with an index littered with such entries as:

Stalin, J. passim.

Other books demonstrate the curious fact that publishers appear to instruct their proof-readers (if, that is, any publishers today employ proof-readers at all, or even know what they are) to stop work as soon as they come to the index; I have read books with indexes containing an average of a dozen or more errors to the column—and errors, moreover, largely taking the form of entries with the wrong page-numbers attached, thus simultaneously rendering the index useless and the reader apoplectic.

On the other hand, there are some indexes that are a pleasure to read in their own right, either because they are deliberately designed to be read, like that to E. C. Bentley's Baseless Biography, or because of the exceptionally high standard they maintain; the very best index I know is that compiled by the late Professor R. W. Chapman for his edition of the letters of Jane Austen, though I am looking forward more than I can well say to the index volume for the Latham-Mathews edition of Pepys, for, if it maintains (and I have no doubt it will) the standard of scholarship of the diary-volumes themselves, it will make the jolliest of bedside-books.

I made the index to my own book myself; though I have a respect amounting to awe for the professional indexer (about whom more in a moment), I could not bear the thought of letting somebody else do it, and besides, I wanted to be the first man (at least I never heard of another) to include an extremely improper joke, in the form of his index-entry, about Mr. Mervyn Griffith-Jones. (Of all the reviewers, only Ned Sherrin spotted it, but Ned's eyes miss nothing.)

Indexing is a highly skilled and scholarly profession, as I would have known from the problems I encountered in my own feeble attempt to emulate the members of it even if I had not already known from my amateur study of the subject. Indexers have a Society of their own, which they did me the honour of inviting me to join, after I had had yet another snarl on the subject in print, and I now get their biannual magazine, The Indexer, which contains articles so learned they make my ears sing. Hark:

This paper outlines a method of indexing, called emphasis indexing, in which descriptors relative to a document are ranked according to the order of the importance in the document of the concepts they represent, and placed into a (descriptor, rank) matrix. Queries are formulated in a similar way, and retrieval of relevant documents is done by simple matrix matching. Submission of queries does not require pre-established search strategies, and user-machine interface is made more transparent.

Indexers are shamefully treated. Many publishers and authors do not make use of them at all, and either make a hopeless mess of the job themselves or do without an index altogether; others think nothing of getting a professionally-made index and then cutting it down, more or less arbitrarily, if it will not fit the miserable ration of space the publisher allocates. Their rates of pay are disgracefully low, too, even considering the arduousness of the work alone, never mind the skill it needs. And they are practically never acknowledged in the book, though the typist commonly is. (I am not complaining that the typist should not be included, only that the indexer should.)

The index to The Times is world-famous, of course, and so it should be, though it is tedious to use extensively because its quarterly, non-cumulative form (I believe it is shortly going to go annually cumulative) means a great trudge through the volumes if you have no clear idea of the date of the item you are seeking. (I remember a scream of dismay from Dr. David Butler, when, compiling his invaluable British Political Facts, he turned to The Times index for some important subject and found only "the depressing injunction 'See every issue'.")

I had got thus far when I happened to mention the subject to a friend, who had a vague recollection of a precedent for my proposal to visit with the law those who produce indexless books. After a brief hunt I found it, and in the mouth of a Lord Chief Justice, too, though, as you would expect of the namby-pamby judges of the last century, he stopped short of advocating execution. But since he did anticipate my own
idea, I am happy to let him have the last word today. He was Lord Campbell, and however unsound he might have been in Nisi Prius, he had the right ideas on indexes:

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.

TABLE TALK

From ‘Table Talk’, The Gentleman's Magazine, Volume CCXLIII (CCXLIV), July to December, 1878:

254. It cannot fail to interest readers of the Gentleman's Magazine to learn that the Council of the Index Society are discussing the propriety of supplying a new and complete index to the entire Magazine. For nearly two centuries the Gentleman's Magazine has been a recognized authority for innumerable facts, all of them difficult, and some impossible, to find in other quarters. As the work will be extensive, and proportionately costly, the Council seek voluntary cooperation from without. It is probable that some of my readers may be able to assist in a labour that is a tribute to the importance of this periodical and that will largely augment the value of the complete series.

From ‘Table Talk’, The Gentleman's Magazine, Volume CCXLIX, July to December, 1880:

381-382. Among recent meetings the place of honour belongs to that of the Index Society. Without fully accepting the implication of the American Minister, who was in the chair, that indexes constitute a royal road to learning, I will admit that they are among the greatest boons to scholarship that literature has supplied. That we have gone back in respect of index-making since the days of our ancestors will be obvious to any one who compares new books with old. . . Almost worse than the absence of an index, unpardonable as this is in the case of works of a certain description, is the presence of an index which is stupidly arranged or misleading. To that amusing and very readable periodical Notes and Queries I would commend, as an entertaining subject, a collection of curiosities of index-making.

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Getting in by the Back Door*

Frank Kermode

Indexes, which readers tend to take for granted, do not generate themselves spontaneously. They have to be more or less laboriously made.

I have made indexes, indeed I used to believe that only the author could make a satisfactory index to his own book; but this view was probably erroneous or naive. Or so I am persuaded by a communication from the Society of Indexers, and a copy of its journal, the Indexer. The Hon. Editor of the Indexer, Mr. L. M. Harrod, says he sent it to me on some inner prompting arising from a perusal of this column, which he “always scans and sometimes reads fully,” a remark that might be thought particularly appropriate to his profession.

Good indexes are brief abstracts of learning. I

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