THE TYPOGRAPHY OF INDEXES

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As against the typography of the body of a book, the more complex content of the index, and the heavier demands made on it by the reader, help to give the typography of the index special qualities. Through consideration of examples, certain arguments are advanced: that the typography of indexes cannot be considered separately from their content; that the typographic conventions of indexes that have been evolved are often sound and well adapted to the needs of the reader; that the particular problems of index typography can stimulate fresh typographic treatment, particularly when there is mutual understanding between indexer and typographer.

In contrast to the continuous text matter of the body of a book, the index has certain special features that make it a subject of interest to the typographer. The material of indexes is non-continuous and takes the form of a list. One reads both vertically and (within entries) horizontally. The language of indexes is compressed, and abbreviations are much employed. These things give the text matter of indexes their characteristic complexity. And one may see this complexity of content as placing demands, to which the editorial and typographic form of the index must correspond.

Another kind of demand is made by the reader of the book. The nature of this demand will be indicated when one says that most indexes are not read but used—flipped through and scanned. The time spent by the reader in thus using the index becomes a factor for consideration—as it is not in the usual reading process. Again, the typographic and editorial form of the index must be adequate to these demands, in doing what can be done to assist—or, at least, not to impede—the reader.

In addition to meeting the requirements and constraints of the production process (which will be touched on at the end of this article), the index may therefore be seen as having to satisfy two sets of demands: those made by its content and those made by its readers. But this distinction is hard to maintain in consideration of any specific example. Thus, one may ask 'is this system of alphabetization appropriate?', or 'should the subheadings have been broken off rather than run on?'. But these questions can only be answered by a reader (or by the reader imagined by those making the index), and will therefore be decided in readers' terms, rather than in the illusory terms of 'what the content demands'.

Here one should mention another set of demands on an index—those made by the publisher. The limits on the space allowed to the index, and on the time and money allowed to the indexer, will have their effect on the final product. Such constraints need not be disadvantageous to the quality of the product. But whatever the outcome of these external pressures, in that they are unrelated to the essential issues of the typography of indexes, they need not be considered further here. One can simply notice that the publisher's typical demands on the index serve to add further complications to the process of making this most complex part of the book.

These special demands may lead to the suggestion that typographic form may make some difference to the ease with which a reader is able to use an index. The complexity of the material, and the reader's demands of speed and
ease of discovery, suggest that appearance and configuration of material might be factors of significant importance to the process of use—as they do not seem to be in the case of simple continuous text matter. The question of what typography could do for an index will not however be addressed directly here. Rather, what will be considered are these necessary prior questions: is it possible to consider the typography of an index separately from its contents that is, what the indexer generates? what happens if these two things, typographic form and the content, are considered separately? if—as will be suggested—the form and content of an index are inseparable, then what part could a typographer play in the making of an index?

MALMAISON. See Napoleon.
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equality of man, argument against
(quoted), i. 208.
errors, two capital, i. 219.

Figure 1. From the ‘General index’, compiled by
James Thornton, to The complete works
of William Hazlitt, Dent, 1934.

Figure 1 indicates the impossibility of treating
as separate the content and the typographic
form of an index. The details of typography—
the system of punctuation and of capitalization,
the use of italics, for example—are coincidental
with, and follow from, the generation of the
matter of the index. That subheadings in im-
portant entries are broken off rather than run
on, for example, can only be described as a
decision of editorial-design policy.

This index was produced before the specialized
‘typographic designer’ had begun to play much
part in book production. And such a typo-
graphe might now question the decision to
justify the lines (that is, where possible, to set
lines of equal length), or the use of full points
at the end of entries. But such reservations do
not affect our judgement of this index as ex-
emplary in its typography. And this high quality
seems to stem largely from the standard of
the editorial and indexing work. This is just
one example of a body of model indexes that
are well-designed in the widest sense—products
of a particular (British) tradition of serious
publishing.

Another example may help to show the sound-
ness of conventional index typography. Looking
at the index to Hart’s Rules (Figure 2) one sees
nothing remarkable. But consider this in relation
to the contents pages list in the same book
(Figure 3). The contents pages function as a
preliminary index, giving the user an outline of
the matter of the book. The typography of
these pages, whereby page references are pushed
to the right of the page, certainly discourages the
reader from connecting heading and page num-
ber. Though, one might argue that this arrange-
mcnt gives the page numbers an emphasis that
they do not enjoy in the index. Both this em-
phasis and an easier horizontal connection
could however be obtained by setting page
numbers to the left of headings. But this would
destroy the symmetry of the page. And this aim
of symmetry and balance is, one suspects, the
main consideration behind the convention
adopted. When nowadays type is not set by
hand in rectangular ‘chases’ (frames) the argu-
ment that this arrangement arises naturally in
production no longer applies.

The different typographic treatment of the
essentially similar material of index and con-
tents page suggests that indexes have been
comparatively free from the purely formal con-
siderations of symmetry and balance—the ‘dis-
References generally, 48 ff.
abbreviations in, 49, 56
in bibliographical matter, 17
in scientific works, 49
least number of figures, 17
to Acts of Parliament, 50-1
to footnotes, 18
to Government and official papers, 52
to law reports, 51-2
to library numbers, 17
to manuscripts, 50, 52
to page and footnote, 56
to pagination, 17, 18
to plays, 50
to printed works, 48-52
to symbols in line-blocks and plates, 12
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cn rule not used, 115 n.
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letter-spacing, 112, 113, 117, 118-19
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New Orthography (1918), 110
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plays, stage directions, etc., 118-19
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quotation marks, 112-13, 116, 117, 120-1
reference figures, 118
Slavonic languages, 110-12
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transliteration, 111, 113, 121
S., St., etc., 4

Figure 2. From Hart's rules for compositors and readers, Oxford University Press, Thirty-seventh edition, 1967.

play' values usually unrelated to use or to meaning. This may, it is suggested, be connected with the peculiar characteristics of indexes noted at the start of this article—their unusual clarity of function. This is something that is harder to attribute to a contents page list or, say, a list of illustrations. Such parts of a book simply do not have to meet the kind of demands made on an index. And one might go on to wonder whether indexers (and editors), having been left to get on with their work without much interference from book designers, have not thus been at an advantage, in being able quietly and unselfconsciously to develop conventions firmly based on the reader's needs.

It is suggested then that it has been characteristic of index typography (more so than the typography of other parts of a book) to employ conventions that best suit the reader—rather than, say, the designer or the printer. The effect that certain typographic practices, outside the indexer's sphere of influence, can have on an index is shown in Figure 4. In this index to a cookery book the majority of entries relate to only one page reference—recipes being the only items indexed. This fact perhaps encouraged the decision to set an em space between heading and page reference, rather than the conventional comma and word space. However, the printer's decision to justify has meant that—while this em space is consistently maintained—the spaces elsewhere will not be of fixed dimensions. To squeeze 'Gammon 18; Baked gammon 183' into a line, the compositor had to set '18;Baked'
without intervening space. And thus the dislocation occurs, whereby one groups page reference ('18') and entry ('Baked gammon') wrongly. This unfortunate incident illustrates the fundamental objection to justification of lines: the variation of word space entailed introduces an arbitrary element into the system of words and space that constitutes text matter. In normal continuous text matter this may not be of great concern. But in the more complex configurations of an index, where horizontal space carries more precise meanings, justification begins to become a significant factor and, one would suggest, an unhelpful one. The conventional narrowness of width of the lines of an index contributes to the problems attendant on justification. The mistake of Figure 4 could have been avoided by setting equal spaces between words and by carrying whole items over onto new lines. But in any case, whether justified or not, the more conventional, watertight system of punctuation and normal word space would prevent such misreading.

Objections, similar to those made against the example of Figure 4, could be applied to the index shown in Figure 5, where lines are justified and an unconventional system of space and punctuation is employed. But, though the risk of confusion is there, in practice the composition avoids the dislocations of Figure 4. This index is an interesting example of the kind of typographic innovations that are possible

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Figure 3. From Hart's rules for compositors and readers, Oxford University Press, Thirty-seventh edition, 1967.
Fritter batter 55
Ham fritters 160
Normandy apple fritters 110
Split pea fritters 99
Fudge, chocolate 226

Gammon 18; Baked gammon 183
Stuffed gammon rolls 129
Garbure 158
Garlic soup 120
Gazpacho 165
Gingerbread men 224
Gingerbread, Orkney oatmeal 224

pica — about 12-point: as 12-point, used as a
unit of typographical measurement — 34
pitch-line — line across bed of press to show
how far printing-surface can extend without
fooling grippers — 235-6
planographic — see surface processes
Plantin, Christophe 84: Plantin (type)
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paper 300 304 310 365, & imposition
318, folding 323, & estimating 367, &
proofs 374-5, & tenacity 375: plate-glazing
— method of smoothing paper surface —
298-9 302: see also albumen plate, duplicate
plate
platen — press which brings paper and
printing-surface together as plane surfaces
— 233 236
play: 109 124 128 255
pochoir — stencil process — 252
poetry — see verse

That indexes are a peculiar and distinct part
of a book is again suggested by the next example
(Figure 6). The width of indentation of the
vertically aligned sub-headings is determined by
the natural length of words in the main heading.
In this feature, therefore, the content of the
heading and subheading (before the point of
indentation) determines its visual or typographic
form. This is, however, something that has often
been the aim of selfconsciously radical typo-
graphers, but it is achieved here (unselfcon-
sciously, one supposes) in a book that is else-
where traditional in appearance. This system
does of course use more space than the traditional
narrow column setting; on the other hand, the
reader may find a readier access through it.
However one judges this, the point that may be
made here is that this typographic innovation
derives (one supposes) from the author-indexer
considering the nature of her material—and not
from any considerations of the designers or
producers of the book; for elsewhere in the book
the typographic configurations are imposed on,
rather than derived from, the content.

One should make clear however that the
‘content’ here referred to is the apparent or
surface content of the words, as against the
deeper content of the meaning of the material—its
hierarchies and system of internal relationship.
The visual patterns which the surface content
produces depend merely on how much space
the words occupy, and, in that words have no
intrinsic relationship with the things that they
denote, the visual patterns of words are arbitrary.
In order to carry the deeper content of the
material, a non-arbitrary visual system (of
indentation, word-space, line space, punctuation,
capitalization and so on) must be devised—one
that provides a suitable coding system for the

Figure 4. From Jocasta Innes, The pauper’s cook-

Figure 5. From Hugh Williamson, Methods of book
design, Oxford University Press, Second
The English Book Trade

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material, rather than an attempt at literal representation of it. But this non-arbitrary system of visual coding is, couched in theoretical language, no more than the aim of any serious index.

Examples such as those of Figure 5 and (perhaps) Figure 6 would seem to confirm the suggestion that the peculiar demands of content of an index encourage clear (and fresh) thinking about typographic form. For, as well as exhibiting a body of sound typographic convention, indexes also show a capacity to innovate and experiment in response to the needs of the occasion. Figure 7 is included here as a warning against the acceptance of such a suggestion without qualification. It is taken from an index with which almost everything is wrong, in its construction and in its typography. One may mention the lack of system and indentation, punctuation, capitalization, and the separation of headings and page references that necessitates the use of 'leaders'. Such an example summarizes all the possible sins of making indexes. But, though a counter example, it does serve to support a thesis of this article—that the content of an index and its typographic form are related intimately and organically. Typographic disorder inevitably follows from disorder in construction; and, equally, typography by itself (if it could be 'by itself') cannot be effective with bad copy.

These examples may suggest the diversity and the particularity of each index. As every indexer knows, there are limits to the application of rules and conventions—there will always be awkward decisions to be made. For this reason
one may be suspicious of the prospects of empirical research supplying useful advice on making indexes. The attempt to apply such research seems to rest on the fallacy that one can draw general conclusions from particular (and often rather strange) instances. And, given the typical complexity of an index, it seems unlikely that much can be learnt from the necessarily simplified indexes that supply the test pieces for experiments.

Also, empirical research isolates factors for evaluation, hoping to report on the effectiveness of certain conventions. This isolation of features denies the essential unity of form and content in an index. One cannot discuss, or test, the effectiveness of, say, letter-by-letter alphabetization or bold type without considering the function of such conventions in a particular case. And this consideration will bring in all the issues that relate to the decision about alphabetization or bold type.

This brief investigation of the typography of indexes has suggested that the content of an index and its typographic form are organically related. The stress laid on this may have implied that a typographer can contribute nothing to index making. Such a suggestion would be misleading. For although much of the typographic form will be generated by the indexer and editor, decisions that they take in this work of generation could, and should, be significantly affected by advice from someone with specialist typographic knowledge. Coding conventions such as the use of bold or italic or small capitals, or the use of special signs, depend on the facilities offered by the system of composition used. A thorough understanding of typographic possibilities may, as the case of Figure 5 indicated, help to meet the special demands of a particular index.

This function for the typographer of supplying advice concerning composition becomes especially important with the demise of hot-metal composition. Such systems (Monotype, Linotype and Intertype) have been the traditional means for setting books; Monotype, as the most complex composition system, has been able to provide rich possibilities for typographic coding. The use of much less sophisticated systems in book production introduces different sets of typographic conventions. Indexes to be set on a machine that cannot supply italic, say, need to be designed to allow for this—designed, that is, from the point when the indexer starts work. And with the growing practice of printing books set on the typist’s (or author’s, or indexer’s) own typewriter, this need to incorporate design considerations at an early stage becomes even more acute.

One might suggest then that indexers would benefit from an education in typography. Equally, it will be clear that typographers must understand the procedures of indexing—for even the more purely typographic decisions, such as the determination of line length or space between lines, will proceed from an appreciation of the nature of the copy. The work of indexing and of typography forms a unity that is ideally taken on by one person. It would not be realistic, however, to see the indexer-typographer as more than the rare exception. But one may say that the indexer and the typographer should certainly get to know each other better.

Figure 7. From Low Warren, *Journalism from A to Z*, Herbert Joseph, Third edition, 1935.

Reference