

Compiling the first *Fiction index*

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The *Fiction index* series*, which Gerald Cotton and I started so long ago, seems now to have become something of an institution.

In 1949 Gerald Cotton, who was then on the Council of the Association of Assistant Librarians (AAL), told me that the AAL had been considering an expansion of its publishing programme, looking for something more ambitious in scale than Hewitt's *Summary of public library law* and Phillips's *Primer of classification*. Gerald had argued that what librarianship really needed was a guide to fiction, and Council had agreed to publish one if he would produce it; Gerald Cotton had agreed to this, if he could choose his own collaborator, and he now proposed me for the job. It was as casual as that, and it was the beginning of a collaboration which lasted until Gerald's death in 1975, and the intensification of a friendship which had begun two years earlier at Library School, and was to survive the stresses of that collaboration undiminished.

Looking back, I am appalled at the blithe irresponsibility with which we embarked on the project. We had no idea what we were letting ourselves in for; indeed, we then had no clear idea of what we wanted to do. We were completely ignorant of the principles of indexing, but we had been given *carte blanche* to compile a guide to fiction, and we were willing to have a bash at it. It must be admitted that we made one or two false starts. What we vaguely had in mind in the beginning was the comprehensive guide to end all comprehensive guides, a fully indexed annotated catalogue, a sort of amalgam of *Baker's guide* and the Wilson *Fiction catalog*, but bigger and better, and eschewing the Eng. Lit. pedantry of the one and the American bias of the other. It did not take us long to realize that this might be bigger than Baker and Wilson put together; it was certainly bigger than both of us, and we had to lower our sights. We decided to concentrate on the Index, but we never abandoned our plans for the annotated catalogue.

So we set out to compile an index to available fiction in the English language, and by trial and considerable error acquired the knack of it, and the *Fiction index* evolved from our efforts. We did not have the deliberate intention of producing 'A guide to more than X works of fiction, including short story collections, anthologies, omnibus volumes, extracts and condensed books mainly available between (certain defined dates), arranged under Y subject headings with numerous references' (to

quote the longest sub-title since the 18th century) but that is what we happened to achieve, and in doing so we set a pattern to be followed by a succession of compilers.

This, briefly, is the *modus operandi* we developed. Gerald Cotton collected the information on which the indexing was based. He drew, with permission, on the *British national bibliography*, *The Bookseller*, the now defunct *Publishers' circular*, and the H. W. Wilson Co. publications, on published guides, on reviews and periodical articles, on publishers' and library suppliers' catalogues and announcements, on the stock of his own library, and when that failed him the resources of Manchester Libraries, and—not least—on his own encyclopaedic knowledge of current English and American writing. He digested this vast amorphous mass of information and regurgitated it upon 5" x 3" cards, which he then unloaded on me.

I used those annotations, and my own rather less than encyclopaedic knowledge, to assign subject headings. I made them up as I went along, not using any published schedule of subject headings, nor referring to the Wilson *Fiction catalog*, to avoid any risk of plagiarism, deliberate or involuntary. I tried to think of every possible heading under which a reasonably intelligent library assistant, bookseller, or reader might with moderate justification be expected to look to identify a book. (I hope that doesn't sound patronizing.) Then, between us, we typed cards for each title under each of the headings I had assigned. That, for some time, was as far as we carried the work, but when we had accumulated several thousand cards I put them all in alphabetical order. We looked upon what we had wrought—and found it a bit of a mess; duplicated headings, ambiguous headings, misleading headings—the lot.

So I sorted out the mess and we went on, accumulating new material and adding to that basic sequence and, of course, creating fresh anomalies and a new mess in the process; and we had to stop again to tidy up. We went through this cycle at intervals until the deadline of mid-1952 was looming up, by which time we had, we hoped, achieved comprehensive coverage of fiction published since 1949 and a reasonable selection of earlier works. A final tidying up; and only at that stage did I bother about *see* and *see also* entries, working rather on the principle that it doesn't matter too much where you assign an entry so long as you put all similar entries in the same place and hedge your bets with plenty

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of references. (I said I knew nothing about the finer points of indexing.)

We managed to meet the deadline, and, what is more, for that first volume I produced a typescript for the printers—398 pages, plus a 12-page appendix, at an average typing time of 40 minutes per page. *Fiction index two* and the first *Cumulated fiction index* were set up in type straight from the cards by a very co-operative printer, which was a great relief. For that first volume, too, we wrote entries into the galley proofs for books published or announced between May 1952, when the typescript went to the printers, and October, when we returned the corrected proofs.

To our relief the first *Fiction index* was well received, and for a work of that type it was widely reviewed. *The Bookseller* headed its full-page review, 'A nice novel about influenza? Certainly, Madam.' I thought that a bit unfair. The idea of anyone actually wanting to read a novel about influenza may be rather absurd, but I didn't think it absurd that someone might want to identify a novel which they knew dealt with an attack of influenza. I think the distinction is important. But *Fiction index one* achieved the distinction of a *Times* Fourth Leader, unique so far as I know among the publications of any branch or section of the Library Association. We should have been even happier if the Leader had mentioned the publisher and the price, but you can't have everything.

Anyway, *Fiction index* seemed to fill a long-felt want, and we pressed on immediately with its sequel. Our method of approach to the work may have been hit-and-miss, and it might have missed, but our pragmatism seemed to have paid, and in the event we did not find it necessary for *Fiction index two* or the first *Cumulated fiction index* to make any but minor changes to the subject headings that I had evolved or to the method of their arrangement. In fact, I don't think that our successors as compilers have made any really radical changes; the schedule to which Marilyn Hicken currently works is essentially the one which first saw the light in 1953. I should be interested to know whether she sees it as a model or a straitjacket.

The carbon-copy *Fiction index two* was published in 1957. We decided, and the AAL agreed, that the next volume should be a cumulation with additional material, and should also be our last. We managed to put the *Cumulated fiction index*—all 552 pages of it—to bed in July 1960. By that time we really had had enough; in fact, both Gerald Cotton and I had fairly serious illnesses while the work was the printer. Fortunately, though, the series has been continued, with the odd hiccup, by Other Hands, and is still going strong. We had a number of discussions with our designated successors, but in fact they gave up before they completed the next volume, and at one stage the AAL were reduced to appealing for volunteers to take up the torch.

For some years now my only contact with the *Fiction index* series has been the half-yearly statement of sales—with attached cheque—from the Hon. Treasurer. Sometimes it has been a bit late. However, the first *Cumulated fiction index* is still selling—steadily if very slowly—and I still get that half-yearly cheque. Not a large one, I hasten to add: my income from that source over the last six months worked out at 30p per week before deduction of tax. I have some souvenirs. When we finished I had altogether almost a quarter of a million cards and slips. I calculated that their total weight was about 800 lb, and that if I had laid them out end-to-end they would have stretched for 19 miles. I have since got rid of a lot of them, but there are still box upon box of them in my loft, and there isn't much of a market for slightly used 5" x 3" cards.

I said that we had very soon had to postpone our original ambition to compile an annotated catalogue of fiction, and concentrate on the index. When we abandoned 'Effie' in 1960, we returned to our first love. Gerald was more faithful than I was; thereafter he worked on it consistently, I much more sporadically, but at the time of his tragically early death work was well under way on a supplement to Baker and Packman's *Guide to the best fiction*, to be published by Routledge who had recently reprinted the original work. I was unable to carry on after his death, but the work was taken over by colleagues of his from Manchester Library School. I hope it may not be too long before we see the appearance of *Guide to the best fiction 1930-80*, mainly by Gerald Cotton, with contributions by Alan Glencross and others, and the complete fulfilment of the grand plan we launched together more than thirty years ago.

**Fiction index: a guide to over 10,000 works of fiction arranged under 2,000 subject headings* compiled by G. B. Cotton and Alan Glencross; Association of Assistant Librarians (Group of the Library Association), 1953. 221 pp.

Fiction index two compiled by G. B. Cotton and Alan Glencross; Association of Assistant Librarians (Group of the Library Association), 1957. 192 pp.

Cumulated fiction index 1945-1960 compiled by G. B. Cotton and Alan Glencross; Association of Assistant Librarians (Group of the Library Association), 1960. 552 pp.

Fiction guides: general: British and American compiled by G. B. Cotton and Hilda M. McGill; London: Clive Bingley, 1967. (*Readers' Guide Series*.)

Cumulated fiction index 1960-1969 compiled by Raymond F. Smith; Association of Assistant Librarians (Group of the Library Association), 1970. 307 pp.

Cumulated fiction index 1970-1974 compiled by Raymond F. Smith and Antony J. Gordon; Association of Assistant Librarians (Group of the Library Association), 1975. 192 pp.

Cumulated fiction index 1975-1979 compiled by Marilyn E. Hicken; Association of Assistant Librarians (Group of the Library Association), 1980. 225 pp.