

# I can't hear you for the silence

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Sole Trader, Paul Barnett (Editorial)

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*Some personal experiences: researching* The directory of possibilities *and* The directory of discarded ideas, *while bedevilled by bad indexes; a letter to* The Bookseller. *Some really ghastly examples of indexes: that of Koestler's* The sleepwalkers *examined in excruciating detail. Books without indexes. Why have publishers let things get into this appalling situation? A few reasons, notably the putting of the financial onus for the compilation onto the shoulders of the author. Major works with important or nonexistent indexes. Could libraries club together to commission indexes for such works, which indexes could be made available on microfilm or -fiche? This idea tentatively explored.*

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Quite a while ago, in May 1981, the Editor of *The Bookseller* was kind enough to publish a letter from me concerning indexing. It was a letter straight from the heart, born of frustration and dismay. Please bear with me as I quote it in full:

Sir,—I'm writing to you not in my professional capacity but as a frequent and regular book purchaser. More and more I find myself deciding *not* to buy books because their indexes are either totally inadequate or nonexistent. A nonfiction book should be not only interesting to read on purchase but also, thereafter, usable as reference material; when this latter function is denied the reader because of an inadequate or missing index, the value of the book is effectively halved—and consequently the reluctance to buy it doubled.

Why has this come about? I think partly because so many publishers' contracts put the financial onus for the compilation of the index onto the shoulders of the author—thereby encouraging him to 'have a bash at it'. But this cannot be the whole story: when I recently telephoned one author of my acquaintance to tell him that his new book was great but that he ought to sue the indexer, I was told that he had paid really a rather large sum for the compilation of the index—to someone supposedly 'qualified'. Yet the damned thing was not only useless but full of howlers! Moreover, although he had paid for it, he had not been given sight of it by the publishers until his *gratis* copies of the book arrived.

I refuse to believe that I am the only book purchaser who is saying 'no' to books on the grounds of the

uselessness of their indexes. After all, most people find the price of a hardback quite steep these days. They have a right to expect that hardback to have all the 'bits'. I hate to think what might be the cost to the book trade, overall, of publishers' miserliness and/or stupidity in this matter.

(*The Bookseller* No. 1749, 16 May 1981.)

The letter was given pride of place in the correspondence column—probably because there was an article on amateur indexing by Ian Norrie in the same issue—and so I sat back waiting for the storm of rebuttal to burst. But, to my astonishment, there was nothing but a very long silence—a silence which has yet to be broken. True, I did get the odd letter. One was from Maurice Prior, another from the Editor of this journal, a third from the Editorial Director of one of the few firms in this country to insist on decent indexes for *every* book. The publisher of a book of mine scheduled for the following autumn said on the 'phone: 'Well, I'm glad you're doing the index yourself. If it's not a good one, I'll write to *The Bookseller*, I'll . . .' The Publishing Director (now, what on Earth does *that* title mean?) of the firm which was to publish another book of mine said: 'I agree with your sentiments entirely'. This was fine, except that his company published *The Edwardian lady* (Ina Taylor's biography of Edith Holden), which seems to me to have an index so bad as to be hilarious.

Aside from that, however, there was no response at all.

Let me tell you why I was persuaded—no, forced—to write to *The Bookseller* in the first place. 1981 was the first year in which my *alter ego*, 'John Grant', had two books published; in June Webb & Bower produced *The directory of possibilities*, which I coedited with Colin Wilson and largely wrote; and in October Ashgrove Press published my *A directory of discarded ideas*, which I wrote in its entirety. Both books, aside from the usual sort of research, involved me in some detailed fact-finding—'must lay hands on Lavoisier's dates in a hurry', that sort of a thing. To my horror, I discovered that the indexes to most of the reference books on my shelves were woefully inadequate. I had of course realized from long ago that those indexes were dodgy . . . but now I was being exposed to the full panoply of their *badness*. At a guess, I'd reckon that over 75% of the indexes I was trying to use were substandard.

## Indexes exposed

Take A. T. Lawton's *A window in the sky*,<sup>1</sup> an extremely interesting astronomy book, whose indexer has omitted to notice such minor personages mentioned in the text as Albert Einstein and Fred Hoyle, and clearly hasn't realized (despite the fact that it tells you so in the text) that pulsars and neutron stars are the same thing. Or take the Penguin edition of Koestler's *The sleepwalkers*<sup>2</sup> . . .

Yes, let's take the index to that one. It is so bad that it defies description, so I hope you'll stay with me as I quote a few examples.

Everybody except the indexer knows that a great upheaval in astronomy began in 1543 when Copernicus published his ideas of the heliocentric Solar System in *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*—a title which can be translated as 'concerning the revolutions of the heavenly spheres'. While working on *The directory of possibilities* I found myself in the position of wanting to find out whether Copernicus made a certain point in *De revolutionibus* or in his earlier *Commentariolus*. I looked in the index to *The sleepwalkers* under 'R' for *revolutionibus* and 'D' for *De*—without success. Leafing desperately through the book, I found that Koestler often talks of the work as *Revolutions*—but, again, no luck in the index.

At that point I gave up, cursing and spitting, and spent the ensuing half hour finding the information by the tedious process of skimming through likely pages. But the next day I was optimistically trying to look up something else in the index when I suddenly came across, under 'B', the entry 'Book of Revolutions'. Here I found a single page reference, despite the fact that Koestler discusses the work for a solid one hundred pages, and mentions it often elsewhere. In fact, the mention of Copernicus' book which the indexer chose to record lies in the middle of a discussion of the ideas of Kepler, and is basically useless.

A few days later, like a fool, I tried to use that index again, looking for something else. I didn't find it. But I did find, under 'O', the entry *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*. This entry at least pretends to give a little more detail. There are thirteen page references, plus three silly subheads. Out of interest, I compared these with the brief mention of the book in the entry on Copernicus, and found that the references differ.

Mind you, tracking down the mention of the book in the 'Copernicus' entry isn't particularly easy. The indexer has chosen to set the subheads in the biographical entries in alphabetical order—so that the reference is under 'T', for '*The Revolutions*'.

So, if you want to look up something about the most extensively discussed work in Koestler's first-rate history, you can't. Even if you are the type who

instantly thinks of looking something up under 'Book' or '*On*' or '*The*' (and, if you are, you shouldn't be reading this journal), using this particular index makes data retrieval little easier than simply thumbing through the pages.

Let's be fair. The indexer of *The sleepwalkers* has allowed me some innocent merriment—and for this I should express gratitude. The subheads in the biographical entries are, as mentioned, arranged alphabetically, so that 'and gravity' comes under 'A' for 'and' rather than 'G' for 'gravity'. And I especially like this section from the entry on Kepler: '. . . astrologer; at Benatek; attitude to women; birth; Chaplinesque quality; circular motion rejected by; comparison with Tycho and Copernicus . . .' I have a vision of a scholar staring at the bookshelves, saying to himself: 'Where oh where can I find something about Kepler's Chaplinesque qualities?'

To take a single index and pull it apart is not my purpose. I could do the same to the indexes of at least 75% of the books on my shelves. Even worse, some of the most important of these books don't have an index at all—the first that springs to mind is Ponnampertuma and Cameron's *Interstellar communication: scientific perspectives*,<sup>3</sup> a vital source book in one of my main fields of interest.

### *Whose the blame? What the remedy?*

Missing indexes exemplify my theme most clearly. Publishers seem to have got into the habit of attaching little or no importance to the index. As noted, most authors' contracts state that the financial responsibility for the compilation is the author's, thereby encouraging him or her to 'have a bash' at this strange new art. Failing that—well, it's a case of 'Elsie's new boyfriend can spell and he'll do it for twenty quid' . . . or, more likely, a hundred wasted quid. In either case, the usually ghastly result is given a quick spot-check to make sure that the indexer has arranged the entries in something approximating to alphabetical order, and then it's off to the typesetter. (If you don't believe me, you may be interested to know that the designer to a well known international packager recently told me that he'd received an index for marking up in which all the book-titles were indexed under 'A' and '*The*'. This compilation had been made by a supposedly qualified indexer and checked by a supposedly qualified editor.)

How has this awful situation come into being? Even the very best of indexers aren't all that expensive, especially when one considers the costs of all the other components of a book. The only possible excuse can be that it is often hard to fit into a book's production schedule enough time for the compilation of the index—but this argument disintegrates under even the most cursory of examinations.

We can all help to improve the situation. Modern reviewers in the general press rarely comment on indexes

(although I treasure *Nature's* description of one of my own): I think they should make it a regular practice. Authors whose books are given lousy indexes, especially if the cost of indexing has been deducted from their royalties, should complain more vigorously. And the courses of action open to the rest of us are obvious: I for one now examine the index of any book I'm thinking of buying and, if it is inadequate, I borrow the book from the library instead. It takes only a few tens of potential buyers to do the same for each hardback book for the publisher to start losing money by his 'economy measure'. In a similar vein, in the bibliography to my *A directory of discarded ideas* I've made a point of indicating those books with lousy indexes and those with none at all.

That said, there are some books which I find it impossible to do without—e.g., the Ponnampuruma and Cameron book mentioned above. If I'd the time I'd sit down and compile indexes for these myself, just for my own private use. And this leads me to a 'modest proposal'.

Since there are so many good books which are marred by rotten or missing indexes—to the extent that they are quite often useless for reference purposes—is it beyond all utopian bounds to suggest that the libraries of this land club together to commission indexes for what are often works of importance? Each library could store the indexes on microfilm or -fiche: since most libraries of any size already possess viewing equipment, the investment would not be high. A profound service would be rendered to readers and researchers all over the country—and at very low cost. Learned societies, who might want indexes to books not held by most general libraries, could easily operate the scheme on an international scale; and the same applies to university departmental libraries. Ideally, the scheme would aim for its own termination, as more and more publishers took the hint and reappraised their policy towards indexing . . .

#### *Who cares?*

But they might not take the hint. As I've mentioned, I waited in vain for a continuation of the discussion I'd initiated in *The Bookseller*. Where were all the angry disclaimers, the vehement defences, even (in my more optimistic moments) the echoings of sentiments? Nowhere to be found. It would be nice to think that this was because the publishing trade as a whole appreciated my *cri de coeur*, that editors everywhere were nodding their heads and thinking: 'Yes, we must do something about this dismal state of affairs in the future'. It would be nice to think this, but clearly foolish. I know that what has happened is that nothing has changed—and the sufferers are going to be book-users like myself, authors like myself, and publishers' shareholders. Oh yes, and competent indexers, who are going to continue

to find their services rejected in favour of the cheaper offerings of that great host of dabblers.

But there is another closing remark which I wish to make (why shouldn't I be allowed two sets of closing remarks?). I wrote to *The Bookseller*, you'll recall, as a result of my frustrating experiences while working on the two directories. Towards the end of my work on the first, I wrote to its publisher saying that, the way things had turned out, the book required a far more substantial index than they had budgeted for; nonetheless, out of the goodness of my heart, I'd do the index myself for their budgeted fee. I was astonished to get the reply that they'd decided, for the sake of economy, to do without an index—since encyclopaedias don't have indexes! (I wondered if they'd ever looked at *Britannica*.) After a flood of increasingly unpleasant letters and 'phone calls, I found myself in the position of having to agree to compile the index to the book for nothing—the threat being that, otherwise, the book wasn't going to have an index at all! (The result of my endeavours fills 29 large-format pages.) I assume that the irony is not lost on you.

It's an old question, I suppose, but will publishers ever learn? Well, under one of my hats, I'm a publisher myself. And I've learnt.

#### References

1. Lawton, A. T. *A window in the sky: astronomy from beyond the Earth's atmosphere*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1979.
2. Koestler, Arthur. *The sleepwalkers: a history of Man's changing vision of the Universe*. London: Penguin, 1964.
3. Ponnampuruma, Cyril, and Cameron, A. G. W. (editors). *Interstellar communication: scientific perspectives*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

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#### Home reading

A long time ago, public libraries printed their catalogues and library users could buy copies to take home to select their future reading. The lack of currency and the high cost of printing such catalogues led to their replacement by the up-to-date but fixed-in-one-place card catalogue, and so deprived readers of the facility for catalogue browsing at home. That facility is now being restored. The Iowa City Public Library is reported (*Information retrieval and library automation* 17 (7) Dec. 1981, 3) to have the capability of providing direct access to its online catalogue for its patrons by means of a public service cable television channel. Readers may telephone their library to request cataloguing information about a particular subject and then see displayed on their own TV screen relevant bibliographic and holdings information.