Rider Haggard's
A farmer's year and its index

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Those who, after reading She or King Solomon's mines, find themselves, like the Pall Mall Budget, comparing Rider Haggard’s vision with that of Dante and his writing with that of the Daily Telegraph, might care to turn to A farmer’s year (Longman, Green & Co; 1899)—if they can find a copy. Here style and vision, subject and treatment, are integrated, and the book—so topical, so precisely set in its twelve months—has a timeless, classic quality not necessarily to be found in Haggard’s romances.

A farmer’s year is Haggard’s diary of 1898 on his little group of farms in Norfolk, as he struggled to farm conscientiously and profitably through the mismanaged agricultural depression. It is replete with detail and description of barley and swedes, draining and hoeing, hens and store cattle; also with sunsets, politics, anecdotes, statistics, methods, local history, rhymes, birds’ nests, digressions, prejudice and passion. There are maps and appendices, and a series of pleasing sepia-wash illustrations by G. Leon Little.

Moreover, Haggard has indexed it lovingly, with double references and informative sub-headings. The style is of its time:

Collie dog, gruesome tale of a, 352
Egyptians, trial of character of dead persons by jury, 236
Foreign Powers, hostile combination of: probable effect on our food supply, 179, 380

Technical terms are indexed to lead to their definitions:

Bush-draining, 14, 43, 97, 109, 420; description of, 65, 76, 78
‘Fying’ ditches and ponds, 11, 80
‘Thwarting’ 95

Some entries may invite the browser to dive into the work to satisfy pure curiosity:

Transvaal, adventure with a cobra, 180; ostrich farming in the, 398, 399
Horsebee, its development from the egg, 315
Bridle, an ancient, 56
Sea shells and sand at bottom of wells, 18

There is a general feeling of space and leisure which we might all envy. The Society of Indexers’ Board of Assessors might none the less have demurred at some of the uses to which this old-fashioned bounty has been put. For example, Africa has references of its own and a very proper see also ref. to South Africa, but cross-references are nowhere found to Natal, Transvaal etc. Under Natal we find ‘Boer family caught in a snowstorm’; the same incident is found under South Africa as ‘sad scene on the veld’, which is evocative but less precise. A particular method of carting wood is found only once under Gilling trees but (correctly) three times under Timber-gilling.

Moresco, a South African hunting-horse, cleverness of’ appears also under Horses in a list of references to ‘intelligence of’; there is a sub-heading for ‘an African horse’s adventures’, but this is a different adventurous horse. In the case of Hood (bailiff) Haggard’s system of thoughtful sub-headings is—this once only—abandoned, and that hard-working and efficient executive receives forty-six page numbers quite undifferentiated, a strangely useless entry; particularly when Year, the farmer’s is awarded over three columns, in which, divided month by month, the book is synopsisized; elections, vestry-meetings and all.

A biographer (Morton Cohen; 1960) writes of A farmer’s year: ‘A long table of contents, a comprehensive index, and a chronological arrangement, allow the reader to find advice readily on any subject... It is all there, and can be found in a jiffy’. [Though of Rural England, Haggard’s two-volume survey published in 1902, Cohen says, ‘Some minor flaws exist... Nor does Haggard’s thoroughness extend to the index as it ought to, where cross-references are noticeably lacking’. Perhaps The Indexer might have a feature commending biographers of literary figures who look critically at indexes of literary figures’ books...]

Perhaps Haggard loved his book more than the minutiae of indexing, but that is surely a good fault in an author, and his index to A Farmer’s year certainly communicates that love, which can be no fault in anyone. Some publisher might care to reissue the book (R.H. is well out of copyright) to please lovers of self-sufficiency, Flora Thompson, gossip and Norfolk, as well as farmers and local and social historians. (But perhaps not Routledge and Kegan Paul, who have seen fit to bring out Peter Berresford Ellis’ Voice from the infinite (1978), the other modern biography, with no index at all. I can’t think how that happened.)