We have received an extract from an index which our correspondent, a librarian, felt worthy of wider notice. Doubtless I am about to be unfair, since I have not the original book to refer to. Bother fairness; comment follows.

The pages sent to us from Hospital and welfare library services: an international bibliography (Library Association/London, 1977), consist of a ‘Geographical Index’ (title and running head in 3 languages) covering 2½ two-column pages (32 entries: names of countries); and a ‘Subject Index’ (title in English only, running head in 3 languages) covering 3½ pages of which the first contains only a list, alphabetically arranged, of the 30 subject headings which follow, still alphabetically arranged, but this time attended by massed ranks of page-references. There might have been 27 subject-headings, but the indexer clearly felt that ‘Hospital Libraries’ might be a little long for comfort and has divided it into four separate entries, of which the longest has only 74 lines (say 740 references). There are no sub-heads and no indenting; the page-numbers are placed under the entry-word, full out across the column, line under line until they stop. It will be seen that for a book of 1264 pages this pair of indexes is a miracle of conciseness.

Its charm for me, however, rests less in its content, however admirably economical, than in its design: one new to me but surely a trend-setter. Apart from two see also references there is no change of type-face. Every effort has been made to avoid short entries, though a few such as the following do expose some blank paper, which detracts from the overall effect:

Dumb
11, 726

Russia (to 1922) see also USSR 5

However, the entries are in general not only few but splendidly long: ‘United States of America’ has 84 lines of numbers; ‘United Kingdom’ has 44; even ‘Bibliotherapy’ has 22. Thus the total view, of handsome, unbroken blocks of greyish-black print on a whitish ground, offers an almost hypnotic design of severe restraint; it should prove ideal for library wallpaper in times of recession.

Knowing as I do the usual standards of the Library Association, I expect this book may by now have been replaced by a later edition, together with a fresh index full of subheadings, where the reader hardly ever has to search more than half-a-dozen references to find what he/she wants; there will be little blobs of bold and italic scattered about with no regard for appearance; level after level of indenting will disrupt the left-hand margin, and the shortness of the lines will make the right irretrievably ragged. Yet again, the standards of fine page aesthetics will have been sacrificed to the utilitarianism of ‘reader-accessibility’.

It is possible that mechanical or electronic aid may have been enlisted for this mammoth task; if so, our simple shoeboxes and burdened brains may be less threatened by competition than we feared.

J.L.B.