Authors’ attitudes to indexes

a symposium

There have been frequent references in this journal to the attitudes of authors to indexing, regretting in particular that publishers make it specifically the responsibility of authors to provide the indexes, but give them no guidance as to how to set about commissioning or obtaining, rather than compiling, these (The Indexer 12(1)21, 12(2)60, 12(3)144, 147, 12(4)171, 13(1)42, 13(2)82, 121, 13(3)172, 13(4)248).

We wrote to some authors to ask rather for their attitude to the actual indexes provided for their own books, particularly where these had been supplied by another hand. Did they throw new light on the work? Did the author itch to revise the index—or the book? and how did they feel when reviews actually mentioned the index, to praise or blame?

Our first contribution comes from our long-established champion of the cause of indexing, star author in relation to indexes, often featured in these pages; Bernard Levin, whose remarks are quoted in full.

I indexed my first book (very badly) because I wanted to know what this strange but to me intriguing job required. I finished it with a mighty vow to the effect that I would rather be dead than do it again. (Mind you, I did include two rude jokes in it.) Fortunately, I then happened upon Mrs Oula Jones, of the Society of Indexers, ‘since when I have used no other’. But although I will never again do it, I like to see how it is done.

Indexes (you see I know enough not to call them indices) have always fascinated me; when I am Prime Minister I shall bring in a law making them compulsory in all books, including novels. I can and do read indexes for pleasure (the index to the definitive Pepys is one of my favourite bedside books), and some well repay the attempt, but even in the drier ones there is much to instruct the reader and even delight him. To look through a really well-planned, ample and understanding index is like doing The Times crossword with the solution at one’s elbow: all the fun of seeing into the compiler’s mind without the labour of working out how his mind operates. When the book is my own, the same fun is obtained, but an additional element enters into it.

Names, places, books, operas—these are the bones of an index, of course, and many an index passes muster with nothing more, provided it is thorough enough at that level. But I want more for myself, and I have been fascinated to see how my indexer has worked herself into my mind so that she can see the book through my eyes and give me the extra element, which consists of themes, concepts, principles, attitudes; my books tend to have more of these than of facts, but they do inevitably pose a problem for an indexer. To start with, should the index limit itself to the themes discussed? Surely not: it should also encompass the themes in the author’s mind, from which his writing springs. To give an obvious example; I write a great deal about freedom, but the word may well not occur in a passage devoted to the subject. The indexer sees this, and under the heading ‘freedom’ will direct the reader to discussions of it in its various contexts. But it is not something that is automatically obvious.

There are more nebulous problems; what does my indexer do about irony, to which I am much given? There is plenty of opportunity to take the irony literally and index it at face value; the reader will then find the reference easily enough, but will have a shock when he discovers that it is by no means what it seems—another problem that to the uninstructed would not spring to mind. (There are accidents, too. In one of my books I mentioned Clive James; it was only the slightest passing reference, in a list of half a dozen names, but it so chanced that the ‘Clive’ was the last word on one page and the ‘James’ the first word on the next. I am sure that Mrs Jones, who is very nearly as wicked as I am, relished the effect as much as I did, for the effect was that Mr James, who would never pick up any book without at once turning to the index to see if he was mentioned in it, must have leaped to the conclusion that I had written a two-page essay on him, with concomitant disappoint-ment when he found I had not.)

The ultimate test of an index, at any rate of an index to a book that is composed of the author’s feelings rather than of an objective dispassionate account of a subject that does not require feeling, is: could the reader construct the author’s outlook, ex pede Herculem, from the index alone? I think, in the case of my books and my indexer, the answer is yes. Indeed, I read her indexes with that principle foremost in my mind, because I know that if the principle has been adhered to, the index will have done its job properly; I take it that the proper job of an index is not only to inform, but in a real sense to explain also.
Sometimes, it is not too much to say that I learn something about my book from the index, in which there is a connection that I have not consciously spotted. (Sometimes, indeed, I do not spot it even when I read the entry, and have to turn rather irritably to the page indicated, while Mrs Jones no doubt shouts quietly to herself.) But this curious filleting of a book which, when filleted, is lovingly reconstructed on the plate, never ceases to fascinate me, and never ceases to remind me of what a skilled and demanding labour it is, not to be embarked upon by amateurs who imagine that just because they can write a book they can also index it. I think I should be made Prime Minister very soon.

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Other authors show most varying attitudes towards the indexes to their own works. Hilary Spurling displays a fine indifference, writing: 'I have not studied them closely enough to have any very strong views—the author being, after all, probably the only person who doesn't need an index as a key to her own work. All I do is check for accuracy, and add a few random extra entries.' How this contrasts with the reaction of Hugh Brogan to the index to his biography, The life of Arthur Ransome (Cape, 1983): 'It makes the book seem very strange, broken down in such a way... it was most pleasant and interesting to go through the index, and gave me a warm glow'. Richard Perceval Graves is equally appreciative, writing of the index, by Sarah Ereira, to The brothers Powys (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983): 'very competently done—a highly professional piece of work. The only advantage in doing an index oneself is that one can more easily highlight important themes in the book. (I did ask the indexer to include under each brother a 'trace development of philosophy through' which was well done. I might have included more such 'themes' which I think are more valuable for readers than the endless lists of unrelated material, connected only by a name, which are often found these days.) But the job, was, in this case very competently done—no such endless lists. In particular each main character's life was nicely 'summed up' in the index. So many indexes are just a waste of space. This one manages to serve a useful purpose. In fact, the more I examine it, the better it seems. Everything of importance is picked out.'

Some authors, however, cherish the principle that they should always index their own works. Geoffrey de Ste Croix writes: 'I feel strongly that any author of a serious, scholarly book should do his own index; or, if he cannot, should get someone else to do the job who knows the subject thoroughly'. Oh, how we all agree with the second part of that sentence! But Mr Ste Croix does realize that more is required than an understanding of the book's subject, adding, 'I am often disgusted by the inadequacy of indexes to books on my own field, [ancient Greece and the classics] usually done with altogether insufficient care by their authors. On several occasions the nature of the index has influenced my decision on whether to buy a book or not'. (Splendid fellow!)

Bamber Gascoigne, another author always to compile his own indexes, gives us his indexing principles:

'I have a very clear idea with every book of mine as to what should be in the index. Each entry should be something that a reader might reasonably expect to find in such a book, or having read the book might require from memory to lead him or her back to a particular passage—and the passage in question must say something worth arriving at, however slight, i.e. must be a piece of information about the name or word indexed. An example of the type of entry which one sometimes sees from over-enthusiastic but under-endowed indexers is "Genghis Khan" which, when followed to the given page, leads to "Probably not since Genghis Khan has there been such an unprincipled monster as..." The other important rule which I work to is that no index entry should have more than a few page references without a subject breakdown being included.'

John Winton now compiles his own indexes in a spirit more of bitterness and financial retrenchment. He has hard things to tell of his experience with professional indexers. His book, Convoy: the defence of sea trade, 1890–1990 (Joseph, 1983) was criticized thus in the Daily Telegraph: 'The book deserved a better index: to trace the unfolding of the arguments and not just the names of people, places and ships'. Wounded Mr Winton writes:

'I feel that perhaps the criticism in the Daily Telegraph was a bit harsh. I suspect that this index was not done by a professional indexer but by a junior in the publisher's editorial or production departments who was landed with the job.

'Every index has to strike a balance between the information it gives and the space it occupies. I once did an index for a book of mine (The forgotten fleet). I was very pleased with it. But as the publishers pointed out, it took up 25 pages. In this case, my feeling was that the Convoy index was about the right size but my main criticism was that it had no entry for 'convoy' except the 1940 film of that name. So the reader has no means of referring to or following the stories of all variously named or numbered convoys (such as PQ17, Pedestal etc.) which are, after all, what the book is about.

'Also, there is a lack of information about the entries. For instance, the words Pigeon, Pillenwerfer, Pimpernel, Pinguin, Pink and Pinto all follow each other in the index, all in the same italic fount and size, and nothing else said. But Pigeon is actually H.M.S. Pigeon, a WW1 destroyer; Pillenwerfer, a WW2 U-boat bubble decoy device; Pimpernel, H.M.S. a corvette of WW2; Pinguin,
WW2 balloon defence vessel; Pink, HMS, a WW2 corvette; and Pinto a WW2 convoy rescue ship.

'But my main complaint about professional indexers, and the reason why I now pay the most careful attention to any mention of the index in any contract I sign, arose from my experience with a book called War in the Pacific: Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay, published by Sidgwick & Jackson in 1978. When I first saw the index, done by a professional indexer whose name and address I have but won't divulge, I pointed out that although the book was naval history and abounded with references to ships, there were no ships' names in the index (except, oddly, HMS Prince of Wales although Repulse, the ship sunk with her, was omitted).

'Whereupon, the indexer provided a second ancillary index, of ships' names. I thought no more about it until over a year later when I saw on a royalty statement that £105 had been deducted for 'author's charges'. It took me a great deal of time and trouble to discover that the 'author's charges' were for the index which, by the contract, was at my expense. The final insult was that the extra £5 was for the added ships' index, which in my view the indexer should have included in the first place.

'From that moment, I decided that indexers would get no more business from me if I could possibly avoid it. Where publishers do not do the index free, I now do them myself. The index I did for a book called The death of the Scharnhorst, published by Antony Bird last July, is not perfect, but it’s quite good enough. It took me a day and a half’s work, at the very most, and probably saved me £105, which was well worth it.'

Another author to suffer criticism of the index to his book is Colin Platt, of whose The castle in medieval England and Wales (Seeker & Warburg, 1983) the TLS wrote: 'The index is minimal, i.e., mere Persons and Places with never a subject among them; which is another pity since Platt has interesting things to say on many relevant subjects'. Professor Platt comments:

'It was my view, certainly, that the index to that particular book should be kept relatively sparse and functional. Like its sister books in what is now virtually a series, The castle is supplied with a more than usually elaborate Contents page, in which the themes of the nine chapters are given at some length. These days, such a practice may seem rather Victorian. But I consider it more useful than a subject index in a book of which the development is already fairly clear, where the text length is no more than 60,000 words, and where the illustrations give a guide to the contents more instantly useful, in many ways, than a conventional index.

'I have had much more elaborate indexes done in the past, one of the fullest and best being to my Medieval Southampton (RKP 1973). But that was another sort of book altogether, where the user might well be expected to be following up a particular point of interest for which the chapter headings would have given little guidance. Characteristically, the index didn’t get the praise it deserved from reviewers!

'Obviously, indexes are almost as wrong if they are over-elaborate as if they are over-simplified. I try to get the balance right book by book, but you can’t please all the people all the time, as your Society must have plenty of cause to know!'

The views of authors on indexing are both entertaining and instructive; such views form part of the spectrum of evaluative criteria that David Crystal considers to be a necessary measure to guarantee consistency in indexing (David Crystal, ‘Linguistics and Indexing’, The Indexer 14 (1) April 1984, 5).

**Anonymity of the scholarly drudge**

In our last issue we referred to the reputed exploitation of authors by publishers, alleged alike by Fay Weldon in 1983 and by Charles Lamb in 1823 ('The eternal triangle', The Indexer 14 (1), 46). Another complainant is Joseph Timothy Haydn, journalist and compiler of The dictionary of dates . . . and many other reference works, who died in 1856, and described his life in a letter to his publisher as 'long and laborious . . . my calamity being wholly superinduced by extreme study, research, and toil, without having had one day of relaxation, writing chiefly for the publishers.'

Our hearts may warm especially to his plight; Robin Myers writes of him and his colleagues, 'many of the scholarly drudges who inhabited Grub Street, "Penny-a-liners" who scratched a living for the press, were also compilers or editors of reference works that were generally issued anonymously under the name of their publishers, their own being long obscured and impossible now to discover.'* Oh, please—renewed efforts on all parts to obtain credit for indexers . . .