‘A book very much to your credit’:
the index to the private edition of Boswell’s Papers

The indexing of the works of James Boswell is one of the mammoth tasks of indexing, to which frequent reference has been made in this journal (‘Dr Powell’s index to Boswell’s Life of Johnson’, 5 (3) Spring 1967, 135-9; The Life of Samuel Johnson and The Journal of a tour to the Hebrides volume of 1900 edited by Percy Fitzgerald, 13 (1) April 1982, 32; and a charming entry telling a whole story in itself from the index to Boswell’s London journal edited by F. A. Pottle, 13 (2), 114).

Professor Pottle undertook the laborious work of preparing for press and indexing a multiple-volume set of Boswell’s papers in a private edition, published by the collector, Colonel Ralph Heyward Isham. The treasure of Auchinleck by David Buchanan (McGraw-Hill, 1974) describes this enterprise: some passages relevant to the making of the index are summarized below.

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We may take up the story in the autumn of 1931, when Professor Pottle, who was perhaps halfway through the editing of the eighteen volumes, began to teach a course on ‘The Boswell Papers’ at the Yale Graduate School. He used an approach which must have been uniquely helpful both to his students and to himself. Each student was provided with a section of the Journals in photostat and asked to supply it with annotations, an introduction and an index. [—What a splendid teaching method; as the process of indexing involves close analysis of the text, and each subheading devised is in itself a précis, it is surprising that more use is not made of it as an English study technique in itself. Ed.] Certain passages were in cipher, which gave a few students practical experience of researching early shorthand systems. It was however Pottle himself who finally identified the shorthand used as Shelton’s ‘Tachygraphy’ of 1641, the very one used in Samuel Pepys’s Diary.

By the end of 1932, with volume XVII in galleys, volume XVIII well under way, and a start made on the index, which was to appear as volume XIX, Pottle thought he might have both volumes ready for publication by the following June, and all the slips ready for the index by the time volume XVIII was actually published. (He had already long passed his original deadline, with the full co-operation of Colonel Isham, who was prepared to support any costs or delays provided the work was well done.) However, it was not until the end of 1933 that Pottle corrected the last proofs of volume XVIII, more than four years after he had begun his task.

He wrote at the time: ‘Of course there is still the index volume, but I do not feel that as such a responsibility . . .’

Many indexers will have discovered for themselves the law decreeing that the longer an index is, the longer, proportionately, it takes. Some 50,000 slips were prepared (double the original estimate), initially by a team of three that included Mrs Pottle. Many of the slips required identificatory material, since the texts of the private edition were not annotated. At the end of 1934, a full-time assistant was employed to complete the copy. After six months he was replaced by another; in September 1935, the copy was sent to the printers and the index volume, of 350 pages, was finally published in 1937.

These were slump years. Colonel Isham’s fortune had depreciated seriously; in order to finance the publication of the work he was obliged to make many sacrifices. He took on a vast amount of public speaking and broadcasting, and sold great sections of his collection of books and manuscripts, including some Johnson manuscript material. Prices were very depressed; one sale of Isham’s library material was described as ‘the Isham slaughter’. The prospectus for the private edition had mentioned no index: Isham had apparently at first envisaged a simple index at the end of the last text volume, but came to see that a full explanatory index was essential if the Papers were to be of benefit to scholars. (Pottle had gladly undertaken the extra work, seeing clearly how necessary it was.) Although the consequent delay to the completion of the private edition cost Isham a great deal, both directly and by putting off the time when the profitable trade edition could be published, he remained insistent that the index should be made, and made properly. In various ways the financial burdens were reduced: Pottle and his wife worked on the slips for nothing; one assistant was funded by a grant; the OUP, who printed the index (the text volumes had been printed by W. E. Rudge), bought back a great many extra copies for separate sale to those who would not be able to afford the full set of the Papers. Nevertheless, the major cost of such devotion to the index was Isham’s, and he should be applauded for it, as for initiating and carrying through the whole project. As Pottle wrote to Isham, when the index was published: ‘That book is very much to your credit, for you planned and executed it with no prospect of any financial return, simply to make the Papers accessible to the scholarly public’.

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