INDEXERS IN FICTION

Deer-stalkers and data banks

For the eleventh instalment in our series we look at indexers in detective fiction.

It is hardly surprising that those who devise sealed-room mysteries and Means-Motive-Opportunity charts are often aware of that perfect analytic/synthetic gadget: the card-index, and its offshoots. Already we have featured The weight of the evidence by Michael Innes (The Indexer 12 (3) April 1981, 124) and A mind to murder by P. D. James (The Indexer 13 (2) Oct. 1982, 114).

Now we take a further dip into the potential treasure-chest of detective fiction.

Indexes and catalogues play their part in the detection process. The hero of Jocelyn Davey’s A touch of stage fright (Chatto and Windus, 1960) seeks clues in the minor writings of a critic called Forsyte: ‘The library’s indexing proved fabulous—a match for the peculiar hide-and-seek game that Forsyte had apparently played in his later years among America’s innumerable “little magazines”’. The great Maigret seeks aid in Maigret tend un piège by Georges Simenon (Presses de la Cité, Paris, 1955), not for the first or last time, from Moers, one of the Sûreté’s forensic experts: ‘Moers possédait des listes de toutes sortes, des annuaires, des catalogues grâce auxquels il pouvait rapidement déterminer la provenance d’un objet, qu’il s’agît d’une arme, d’une paire de souliers ou d’un mouchoir de poche’. A lady answers a telephone enquiry in Lawrence Block’s The burglar in the closet (Pocket Books, New York, 1978): ‘... you can try Gag. That’s initials, G-A-G, it’s Gotham Artists’ Guild. They’re a reference service, you go there and they have slides of everybody’s work in their files, plus they have everything indexed by artists’ names, and they can tell you what gallery handles an artist’s work or how to get in touch with him directly if he doesn’t have any gallery affiliation. They’re located somewhere in midtown, I think in the East Fifties. Gotham Artists’ Guild.’

To which the enquirer, though he has never met the lady, very properly replies, ‘I think I love you’. Dead for a penny by Charles A. Goodrum (Gollancz, 1979) allows us to share in engrossing detail the hunt, in ever-decreasing circles, through a vast data bank for the vital factor linking a series of coin-thefts. Just as the librarian who is guiding the detectives in their quest (George thought, ‘Thank God there are librarians to be; this young lady could only be a librarian or a nun’) is about to bring on screen the final and decisive information, ‘the computer streamed a paragraph across the center of the screen: “The Capital Line program will be inoperative for approximately four hours for maintenance and update”’. ‘****!’ said the virginal Miss Arnetie’.

Indexing is much discussed, with knowledge and passion, by some characters in Dead for a penny. ‘Those of us on the research side [are] in love with knowledge, any knowledge, and to us the end is to gather it in and store it and then get it back when we need it... We’ve gone from lists to indexes to bibliographies to catalogs to the computer! We’ve got the stuff into digital form and can cut back and forth by Boolean logic till hell won’t have it. The Millennium at last!... We always treated our great card catalogs as a sort of joke. We all took them for granted and we let them die...’ But computer-error is not an occasional anomaly; it is all-pervasive; when a great Library did a test-run almost ten thousand entries were erased through a programming error. ‘They think they were able to reconstruct it... that many books, that many documents, that much of our written experience is taken from us. We’re blind...’ although, as this speaker thinks to himself later: ‘... the worst question is, Should we even be concerned at the loss of bits of data? Might not forgetting clear the way to new thoughts and new solutions?’

The author is however aware that the need for economy and efficiency may make a manual subject index fallible in a different way: ‘You have to outguess us librarians, or the book is completely lost to you. You always have to go up the vocabulary from the very specific to the general. We stop with the bottom rung... [card catalogs] look so organized, they intimidate the user. “They must know what they’re doing—I must be doing it wrong”’.

In Michael Gilbert’s Smallbone deceased (Hodder and Stoughton, 1950), the Horniman Alphabetical Index used by the solicitors Horniman, Birley & Crane has almost the personality of a character in the novel. The process by which every letter sent from the office is numbered, filed, indexed in impeccable detail and eventually, if it pertains to a ‘first-class’ client, lodged in ‘a Horniman dust-proof, moisture-proof, air-proof and indeed mouse-proof Box’, will be of professional interest to all our readers. (It is giving little away to divulge that when the corpse of one Marcus Smallbone is found in the deed-box bearing his own name, it is the omission of all these meticulous preliminary procedures that provides the mystery, and therefore the plot, of the book. Clearly the murderer had none of an indexer’s instincts.)

When indexers appear as characters in these books, less than decent respect for the profession is often shown. An early P. D. James, Unnatural causes (Faber, 1967), has one of the characters describe the murdered man, an author: ‘He must have been a strange sort of chap. Fussy. Methodical. That card index, for instance.’ The wretched Mantel, in No better fiend by Edmund McGirr...
(Gollancz, 1971) (which also has some divertingly drawn encyclopaedists and publishers among its characters), seems to have lived in a penurious half-world of near-Dickensian squalor, hovering between peccadillo and crime: the encyclopaedia-editor Boat, who has commissioned indexing work from Mantel in the past but recently told him, after an ethical lapse, that he would not require his services again, says of him, 'Poverty and his vices drove him to a despicable action, but the man was not responsible in the higher sense'. As for Death in diamonds by K. Giles (Gollancz, 1967): 'A meek man who drinks when he can get his hands on it . . . He indexes learned tomes'. Well really; try transposing those two main verbs, K. Giles, and you may be nearer the mark.

Finally, the classic Smallbone deceased provides a delightful bonus for indexers with time on their hands: 'Henry Bohun was once more staring thoughtfully at the little stack of cards on the desk in front of him . . . finding that there were fifty-two of them he dealt out four bridge-hands and came to the conclusion that he could make three no trumps without difficulty on his holding, which included such obvious winners as "The Duchess of Ashby de la Zouche" . . . "Lieutenant-General Fireside's Marriage Settlement No 3", and, most promising, "The Reverend the Metropolitan of Albania—Private Affairs". He reshuffled the cards and started a card house . . .'

J.L.B.

We are grateful to Peter Greig of the Canadian Society for sending us many of the references used in this article, and would welcome others that readers may contribute.

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Moreana — after twenty years

Readers of The Indexer ought to familiarize themselves with a truly original index undertaking: the cumulative index to twenty years of Moreana. This serial publication is a bilingual (French and English) Quarterly of studies devoted to Thomas More, his circle, his friends and foes which, last year, celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Moreana is the mouthpiece of the International Association Amici Thomae Mori. The Association and its admirable Quarterly have flourished under the direction of l'Abbé Germain Marc'hadour. Any student of sixteenth-century Humanism as well as of Theology is or should be intimately acquainted with the pages of Moreana. Every issue is vibrant with the energy of its scholarly leader.

Saint Thomas himself would be both astonished and delighted by the accolades he receives in every single issue. No one would deny that More stands in the shadow of a much greater humanist and theologian, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus, except for the fact that he was spared martyrdom, was perhaps even more deserving of a sainthood. Erasmus, in contrast to Saint Thomas, cannot be accused of having tortured heretics. (See 'More' entry (p. 101), 'persecution of heretics.') I mention this merely to point out that Moreana waves the banner of Thomas Morus not without emphasis and in doing so opens up a territory that is desperately in need of investigation and elucidation.

And now to the point I wish to make. In honor of the anniversary, two eminently gifted young scholars have compiled a convolute of some 124 pages, indexing the production of twenty years. Let me just enumerate the indexes, section by section: 'Articles in English' (9-24), 'Articles en Français' (25-31), 'Book Reviews in English' (32-40), 'Comptes rendus en français' (41-51), 'Varia idiomata' (52 f. = Castellano, Deutsch, Italiano, Latine, Nederlands), 'Poemata' (53 f.), 'Biblia' (55–58), 'Index personarum et rerum' (59–124). The last, a truly impressive and imaginative index! One only needs to look under 'Erasmus Roterodamus' to find on over three columns a rich and rewarding outpouring touching upon almost any aspect of Erasmus's work and personality as well as his relationship to other personalities and countries including Japan. Thomas More gets some 8 cols., including a genealogical table covering a full page (104). While Father Marc'hadour is the spiritus rector, it is two young American scholars, Mary and David Bradshaw, who carried out this remarkable task and in doing so created a set of exemplary indexes.

Reference

1. Moreana; time trieth truth. The issue here reviewed: Moreana 1963 1983, 'Index XX voluminum'.

William S. Heckscher

—You will find entries for Antiochus of Ascalon and Antiochus of Syracuse, but not for Hardy, Marx, Nietzsche, Pound, Reinhardt (Max or Karl) or Vico, to name but seven. They are alluded to little enough in the text without adding index to injury.'—Oliver Taplin in Times literary supplement, 30 April 82, reviewing The legacy of Greece: a new appraisal, ed. by M. I. Finley (Clarendon Press).

—What an odd new concept of the function of an index—to compensate for textual neglect!

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