The agony and the ecstasy of a DIY author-indexer

Hugh Brogan

It is all behind me now. The page-proofs of the index went off last week (I write this on 7 August 1984), and now there is nothing to do but wait for the author's copies. To fill in the time I make virtuous resolutions: never, never, never to compile my own index again.

Yet it seemed an inevitable decision. The book (a history of the United States)* is just under 700 pages long. A professional index-maker's fee would swallow up most, or all, of the advance. Besides, everyone is always saying that an author is his own best indexer. I rather doubted that was the case, having employed Hazel Bell for my last book, and been much pleased with her work; but might not my History justify the remark? It had taken me, off and on, fifteen years or so to write, and there were things about its structure which an adequate index ought certainly to bring out, but which might perhaps escape the eye of a strange indexer. And then, ought I not to accept the challenge, for the good of my soul? All these things weighed with me, but I am afraid it was the financial point that weighed heaviest. I moved house last January, and have been unable to bring any order into my affairs ever since. So I set to work.

I mustn't pretend to be apologetic about the result. I had two strokes of luck at the outset. Mrs Bell was trying to get a contribution from me for The Indexer, and had sent me an issue of the magazine as a stimulus; and at a jumble sale in Cambridge I came across a mint copy of G. N. Knight's Indexing, the art of. I made it my bedside book for the duration; I used to read a chapter, if relevant, before going to sleep; and without it I really don't think I would have come through. For instance, it was Knight who rammed home to me the importance of cross-references, and stiffened my resolve whenever I thought I was perhaps including too many of them. Blessed be his memory; and the one piece of advice I would give without hesitation to any other amateur rash enough to follow my example would be to get hold of Knight, or some similar volume, or a run of The Indexer, and make a Bible of it till the job is done.

But what neither Knight, nor Mrs Bell, nor The Indexer prepared me for was the sheer physical demand-ingness of the job. Long before the proofs arrived I had marked up a typescript with all the words and facts that I thought should be indexed; and that wasn't a short job

(And I had to combine it with moving house). I had bought my index cards too—hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them; far more than I had expected to need; far more than an index on the scale requested by my publishers would require. I shut my eyes to the implication, and ploughed on. So I was well-prepared when the page-proofs arrived: but the index had already taken a month out of my life.

At this point I hired an assistant, a fourth-year undergraduate at my university (Essex) whom I knew to be amiable, intelligent and reliable, though I was not teaching him this year (it was my sabbatical, and I doubt if I could have completed the index in anything like time if I had had my usual duties). He sat at one end of the table transferring my markings from the typescript to the proofs, and occasionally asking useful questions (and also, I am glad to say, laughing at the jokes in the text). I sat at the other, correcting the proofs. It took about three full working days. At the end of that, I paid him £50 (I hope it was a fair rate) and was left alone with the horrid job of transferring the page numbers to the cards. It was now mid-March.

I will draw a veil over the next few weeks. The work was interesting, indeed in its way pleasurable; but it never let up. It seemed never-ending. In mid-April I went to Paris for a week: I had made all the arrangements, and had expected to be done by then, and couldn't back out without financial loss and gravely disappointing a dear friend; but the index was waiting for me when I returned. Fortunately I was now on the downward track. The index was much too long (I had mercifully mislaid the letter from my publisher telling me how long it ought to be, or I think my nerve really would have failed) and I cut it ferociously. Then I typed it out, and to my surprise perceived that it was coming out a thing of beauty. George Washington is the hero of my book (his unbreakable character seems to me a perfect model of what we need in our political leaders) and I was especially pleased with his index entry, and the device I used for dealing with quotations:

- on T. Paine, 178;
- 'grey and blind', 191;
- on 'raising a standard', 192;
- on postwar recovery, 194;
- on Shays's rebellion, 197;
- on Georgia, 208;

Looking over the thing in proof, I no longer experience this intense aesthetic satisfaction; but there was once a surprise of joy, which ought to be recorded.

The typing was finished, and then I found the publishers' letter. The index was about 50 per cent too long. It was also about three weeks overdue. And I was too exhausted to be able to bear to contemplate resuming work on it. In fear and trembling I took it up to London early in May; and was told a few days later that it had given great satisfaction (I beamed) because it was actually alphabetic (collapse of vanity). Apparently many authors haven't grasped this basic principle. So I was allowed to go free until the proofs arrived.

It was an extremely instructive experience. I am glad I did it, but, as I began by saying, never again. A professional indexer (I remember how long, or rather how short a time Mrs Bell took over the index to my book on Arthur Ransome) is a much swifter, surer operator than any author can hope to be; and I don't think that a professional's work on my history would have been significantly worse, if at all, than my own. It might indeed have been better. The hitch remains the cost. The author is supposed to bear it, and naturally resents the expense; but my experience has convinced me that an index is so integral a part of a book that it really is the business of the author, and of no-one else, to make sure it is a good one. It must be, of course, an allowable professional expense for tax purposes. But I think the real answer is that the author should get a realistic estimate of what a good index will cost him, as soon as possible, and make sure that his advance includes an allowance for buying one. And so I shall tell my agent, next time a contract has to be negotiated.

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A glossary for indexers III

Further suggestions for terms and definitions for the lighter aspects of indexing

Alphabetization: A topic for debate, used to awaken somnolent gatherings of indexers. Bloodshed may be averted by the introduction of the subsidiary topic: British telephone directories,* on which all agree.

Letter-by-letter arrangement: the obvious method for ordering index entries, as everyone with an ounce of intelligence agrees.

Word-by-word arrangement: the only possible order that anyone but a complete idiot would consider using.

Chain indexing: occurs only twice yearly, before the spring and autumn publishers' lists—indexing being as seasonal an occupation as hop-picking. As one index typescript is rushed off to the publisher, a fresh pile of proofs awaits attention, and the phone rings with a third/fourth/fifth offer . . . days of wine and roses to dream of through the bleak, empty, actual spring and autumn.

Free-reading: undertaken for pleasure, at leisure, with no obligation to underline, note names or devise headings as one reads. But the habitual responses may prove too strong.

Out-guessing the reader: not only recognizing every likely heading under which a subject may be sought, but anticipating too the more outre alternatives a reader may suppose possible, so that every searching eye may be met with a cross-reference.

It has been suggested to us that this glossary should include computer terminology. But when BASIC language already includes the serious command, 'Disable character entering input buffer event', and its users can make frequent use of 'Goto' without ever feeling the urge to add, 'Thou'rt an arrant knave', what further absurdity may one propose?

In lieu, we invite readers to send us their original short stories based on the following selection of calls from The BBC microcomputer user guide:

JSR OSBYTE
Write to I/O area SHEILA
Read key within time limit
Flush selected buffer
Remove character from buffer
Cancel VDU queue
Disable character entering input buffer event
Set ESCAPE flag
Acknowledge detection of ESCAPE condition
Explode soft character RAM allocation
DIM GAP
RUN
Enable ESCAPE pressed event.

*British telephone directories: lists of subscribers ordered according to a system which few indexers profess to understand; they are therefore enraged that they nevertheless manage to use them quite successfully.