Index makers

In this series we shall look at the personalities and careers of individual indexers of the past: some professional, like the one below; some famous in other fields who undertook an occasional index, such as Constant Lambert, previously featured (The Indexer 14 (3) April 1985, 177–8).

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SAMUEL AYSCOUGH, 1745–1804

‘Librarian and index-maker’ are the first words of the account of Samuel Ayscough in The Dictionary of national biography, in which he is perhaps the only person to be described as ‘index-maker’; Benjamin Wheatley is called ‘bibliographer’. Ayscough’s life story and indexes are interesting.

Then a friend found him a post in London, as supervisor of street paviors. ‘It was doubtless this employment’, comments the DNB, ‘which gave him the capacity for the rude labour of index-making’. He soon got other work, first as a bookseller’s assistant, and then in the cataloguing department of the British Museum Library, ‘at a very modest salary’. He added to this by arranging private libraries, and after a rise in pay, and with a little help from friends, he was able to bring his father to London and support him in comfort.

Perhaps Ayscough’s first indexes were those to his Catalogue of the Manuscripts preserved in the British Museum, hitherto undescribed, and consisting of five thousand volumes. This work, published in 1782 in two quarto volumes, contains, firstly, the catalogue of numbered manuscripts, classified into many subject sections and sub-sections, with title or a few words of description for each, and secondly, two indexes, one of the manuscripts in numerical order, with references to the catalogue, and the other of all names of persons occurring in the catalogue. It is this index, of more than 100 two-column pages, that gives the catalogue its value, and it is a good index by modern standards; though we no longer accept the practice then prevalent of treating I and J as one letter, and also U and V. The catalogue was published by leave of the Museum Trustees, but was a private venture on the part of Ayscough. Only 250 copies were printed, selling at two guineas.

In 1785, after fifteen years at the Museum, and several applications for vacant posts, Ayscough was appointed Assistant Librarian, and so remained for the rest of his life. He was now able to fulfil a long-standing wish to take holy orders, and became assistant curate at St. Giles in the Fields. In the last year of his life, he was given the living of Cudham, Kent; he had a dispensation for non-residence, but made the journey there every weekend. He is said to have been most attentive to his clerical duties, and to have been a good preacher. For fifteen years he gave the annual Fairchild sermon in Shoreditch Church,
on ‘The Wonderful Works of God in the Creation’. His work as clergyman, combined with that at the Museum, and with index-making, must have meant a very laborious life.

In 1786 John Stockdale published an edition of Shakespeare’s plays, and commissioned from Ayscough a companion volume: An Index to the Remarkable Passages and words made use of by Shakespeare. It is an approach to a concordance, but is by no means complete, and the principles of selection are not clear. References are given, not only to play, act, and scene, but also to page, column, and line of Stockdale’s edition. For this work Ayscough received a fee of 200 guineas, a much higher rate of pay than usual for the rest of his work; he told a friend late in his life that he had earned in all £1,300 by indexing.

Several of Ayscough’s indexes were to long runs of periodicals. An example is that to The Gentleman’s Magazine for 1731 to 1786. It is in two volumes, containing an index to ‘essays, descriptions, and historical passages’, and other indexes to names of persons, names of books, poetry, and plates. Examination shows that Ayscough’s indexes were made almost entirely by amalgamating the indexes supplied in the separate volumes. A fault in the original indexes of names of persons is multiplied in the General Index: surnames are not given initials, so that all persons of the same surname are treated as one. This produces such large numbers of page references for the more common surnames as to render the entries useless. Some of the subject entries also suffer from excessive length, with pages of unsorted run-on subheadings in order of occurrence. Ayscough need not be blamed for this, having probably not been given the opportunity to do otherwise.

His index to the first 20 volumes of The British Critic has an index to ‘Passages in the Criticisms and Extracts’, and another to books reviewed, both compiled from the indexes in the separate volumes.

Indexes to two of the learned 18th-century county histories give the best idea of Ayscough’s capabilities.

The History and Antiquities of Northamptonshire was edited from materials collected by John Bridges (1666–1724), and published in 1801. The two great folio volumes have an index of 58 three-column pages. Names of persons with the same surname are combined in one entry, with the different Christian names as run-on subheadings, in alphabetical order. Place-names have run-on subheadings in order of occurrence. Where a place-name is also a surname, the entry has subheadings for the place first, and then for the names of persons. Long runs of undifferentiated page references are rare.

The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey was edited from materials collected by Owen Manning (1721–1801), and published in 1804. The three folio volumes each have an index, extending to 43, 45, and 61 three-column pages respectively. As with the other county histories, the type used in the index is much smaller than that of the text, a column containing up to 60 lines. The surnames for Surrey have the different Christian names as set-out subheadings, but otherwise index arrangements are much the same in the two books.

These indexes are almost exclusively of places and persons, but there are other entries, though very few. Some of these are such as might be expected from a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, to which Ayscough was elected in 1785—for example, coins, Roman; coins, Saxon; Roman antiquities; Roman roads.

These topographical indexes are remarkable for their great length, their competent organization, and concise and informative descriptive phrases. They are memorable examples of Samuel Ayscough’s enormous output of work, and may be regarded with admiration and respect by modern indexers. We can understand why he was known among his contemporaries as ‘prince of indexers’.

M. D. Anderson

String indexing

This new work by our Canadian colleague Peter Greig lists sources of information on a number of string indexing systems. String indexing: a selective reading list, a booklet of 23 pages, begins by pointing out in the Introduction that in preparing the list ‘no adequate definition of “string indexing” or of a “string index” was found’. Consequently Greig has used as his guide the list of indexing systems given by Timothy Craven in his book String indexing (Academic Press, 1986). Where there are no entries for systems the reason is that no printed sources were found, while key word permuted systems, such as KWIK and KWOK, are omitted. An article in The Indexer (14 (4) Oct. 1985, 255–6) by Craven describes what string indexing can do; but it does not, and is not intended to, give a definition. It is interesting that although the term has been in use among librarians for some years even the latest edition of Harrod’s librarians’ glossary published in 1984 has no entry for it.

Greig’s list contains 18 sections including such systems as ASI (Articulated subject indexing) and SLIC (Selective listing in combination indexing). The number of entries ranges from a single work to 11 pages in the case of PRECIS and covers where appropriate Definitions, Bibliographies, Manuals, Applications, and General Works. The entries are mostly taken from journal articles, but some are research reports and books.

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P.B.