Topographical indexing

J. F. W. Bryon

The problems of achieving comprehensive coverage of place-name material are discussed and examples from the national press, journals and popular magazines are given. Relevant material is often buried within other articles. Although 100% coverage is impossible, more could be done to improve the situation by investigating the range of indexes produced and rationalizing with, for example, an ‘index of indexes’.

Major reference works, bibliographies and archives are also important for place names, but most lack relevant indexes. Greater co-operation between indexers is proposed.

Introduction

Bradford’s Law of Scattering does not apply only to the literature of science and technology: articles in the arts, humanities and social sciences also appear in unlikely periodicals, so that the task of achieving comprehensive coverage in a subject library is rendered impossible. No special librarians know this with more chagrin than those in local studies departments of public libraries; intent as they are on tracing, obtaining and conserving for posterity everything published about a given area or place, they find that potentially useful material appears in a multitude of publications, only a small proportion of which are received in their parent institution, let alone the department itself.

Instead of being able to search all the latent sources systematically to make additions to their collection, librarians are dependent upon serendipity and the goodwill of colleagues and library users, being sadly reminded by each donation or discovery of the gaps which develop. On such occasions, as a salutary corollary to the pleasure of making a welcome if unexpected accession, there is the inevitable misgiving as to what else may exist which has not been traced. There is, indeed, a constant, universal danger of locally relevant material, some important, not being acquired for future reference. A few examples will illustrate the point.

1. The national press

(a) News items and editorials: From time to time provincial localities become a focus for national attention, leading to news reports and editorial comment in major newspapers. Since The Independent, The Times, etc., will not suffer from the inhibitions which tend to restrict coverage in the local press, and because the former possess the added advantage of a more objective view, placing local events in context, the national selection of reportage and assessment should ideally be included in the collection; but though the major contents of The Times and its ancillary publications, and of The Financial Times, can be traced consistently through their respective indexes, without too much staff time being spent in scanning current issues (assuming that these are available) this is impossible for other newspapers. The date of an incident will facilitate indirect discovery of some such items, but consistent retrospective searching is virtually impossible, while there is a further danger of omission, since major papers at intervals incorporate feature articles not obviously dependent upon topicality, or inserted supplements, accompanied by relevant advertisements and illustrations, devoted to specific regional subjects which provide a context for the news.

These can relate to any one of a number of topics, often of considerable local interest—a given city or port; a provincial industry; property values in an area—all desirable accessions for an appropriate ‘local collection’, objectively summing up as they do a current situation, not otherwise recorded.

(b) Colour supplements: These are another potential source of useful material—attractively produced magazines which carry illustrated articles on newsworthy items, often relevant to a locality which is part of a public library’s responsibility—e.g., a major sporting event; a significant by-election; a transport problem (motorway, canal, small-gauge railway); an idiosyncratic local resident; an institution’s anniversary.

2. Periodicals

A surprisingly wide range of scholarly, learned (including technical) journals include articles of potential value to local historians, geographers, etc. Some are covered in British Humanities Index and similar services, but most are not. Where they are analysed, it is not always under place headings; subject indexing often omits topographical entries, but practice tends to be inconsistent.

3. Magazines

There are hosts of popular magazines, in scores of genres—sporting; hobbies; natural history; ‘general interest’—carrying features, illustrations and articles on specific, sometimes local, aspects of their main topics, and thus contributing an added dimension to the data presented in local newspapers and magazines. If a major factory, office block, stadium or bridge were opened in...
Xtown, for instance, or a proposal made to begin open-cast mining or nuclear waste disposal in a given county, the pros and cons, the reasons and consequences, the national as distinct from the local implications, will be found in a wide range of publications, including not only official documents and national newspapers, but also journals aimed at a wider audience than local residents. Environmental problems are particularly good examples of the topics generating national controversy, comment and assessment over local activity—Green Belt development; river pollution; airport location; urban decay, etc., not only affect localities directly, but raise matters of principle of wider concern, create precedents, prompt speculation and comment, in such journals as The Listener or The New Statesman, and also those addressed to farmers, conservationists, health and recreational enthusiasts (e.g. ramblers or anglers), property dealers, architects, transport officials, local authority members, financial investors and many others.

Less familiar examples will serve to reinforce the point. Private Eye, not habitually regarded as being particularly concerned with local history or architecture, celebrated the opening of the post-war cathedral at Coventry with a cover illustration and critical caption, plus a sardonic editorial note which tempered the euphoria generated at the time. A dispute at Lincoln between the local authority (who were proposing municipal taxicabs) and taxi drivers serving the city was featured, not only in newspapers in the area, but also in The Cab Driver.

Hundreds of subject periodicals from time to time include articles on a local aspect of their interest—trade, sport, cultural activity; hobby, education, politics, etc.—prompted by a festival, competition, dispute, disaster, triumph, anniversary or other occasion. Where these and similar events or developments achieve national attention there may well be editorial coverage, comment, illustrations—even cartoons—which local libraries need to add to their collections for the information of posterity. The radio and television coverage which accrues to add to their collections for the information of pos

Are such items important? Not invariably, of course. Not all are written by experts; some (especially free-distribution magazines) may be by journalists who base their articles on local library holdings and add nothing. Who is to know, however, without seeing each article, etc., which both adds to the documentary record and is of significance? How can a future historian assess the wider significance of a local event (economic decline; agricultural change; exhibition centre; national garden festival) unless he has access to such contributions? How, in particular, can he judge the success or failure, in national terms, of local enterprise?

All such items as have been indicated can add a dimension to what otherwise might remain merely a record of parochial fact and opinion. Even a comparatively superficial treatment of a topic will probably be of interest to later generations, indicating as it will what was acceptable at the time of publication, the level of general or specialist interest, the limits to what was known, how outsiders viewed local initiative, the factors regarded as important, and the arguments used in controversial issues. The benefits of hindsight are provided by seeing publications of a similar sort from earlier centuries: if an article or news item of today were dated, not 1987, but 1887, 1787, 1687... would not contemporary researchers be delighted to find it available?

Range of indexes

100% comprehensiveness is, it is recognized, a hopeless dream, however propitious the circumstances, and present conditions are not conducive to such ambitions. Something better than the current position, however, is desirable. What degree of coverage is feasible, and by what means? More might be possible if indexers and librarians were to discuss the needs, and the ways to meet them. A first step could be to investigate the range of indexes at present available, followed by rationalization and/or expansion of these. Even subject indexes to those which existed would be helpful to users at present without them.4 Such a survey might be carried out by a working party of indexers with an interest in this aspect of their craft, and their report have practical repercussions, pinpointing as it would the subject areas in greatest need of analysis. An ultimate outcome could even be an additional service—a new B.T.I. (British Topographical Index). One would imagine that it is not beyond the wit of a new generation of computer specialists to devise the necessary software, given the will, so that relevant entries might be assembled from the Library Association stable of indexes, much as the H. W. Wilson Company editorial staff collaborate in providing each other with appropriate contributions. Market research could suggest its viability.

Retrospective publications

It is not only current journals which lack topographical indexing, however: in addition one has the backlog of retrospective publications, including many reference works of great potential use for local studies, which at present are virtually inaccessible to the local historian. Bibliographies are an obvious example. The British National Bibliography is a model today, providing topographical access via its subject index, which is an entrée to many otherwise untraceable items with unhelpful titles, but even this noble compilation has not always been so helpful; the early volumes need supplementary indexing.

The Aslib Index to Theses is another bibliography requiring a topographical index: dissertations are written on local topics in virtually any subject area except the pure sciences, and can only be traced now by patient,
thorough, page-by-page scanning. Biographical dictionaries are another category of reference work containing local material of untold importance. Who's Who, Who was Who and the Obituaries from the Times volumes are obvious examples. There have been a number of subject gazetteers3 in recent years which demonstrate the need, and which do a little to remedy the gap, but each (inevitably inadequate and incomplete) serves also to highlight the absence of the topographical index to the Dictionary of National Biography, and its supplements which must be compiled eventually, and which would provide the basic source to which subject gazetteers would be supplementary.

Archival manuscripts are of obvious importance for local history: where county and other record offices have compiled place indexes to their collections they are inevitably in constant use, but published guides are usually to broad groups of materials. The local relevance of individual manuscripts in (say) quarter sessions records needs to be discovered by long searching of large numbers of rolls. The short-lived series issued by the Royal Commission of Historical Manuscripts5 to manuscripts in the National Register of Archives would have been invaluable had they been continued.

Illustrations of early landscapes, in the form of paintings, drawings and prints, abound, but those in most galleries are catalogued by artist, their topographical significance being of little or no interest to art historians. Here and there local enterprise has provided an invaluable aid7 but similar compilations are needed for every county, as are carto-bibliographies of maps.

A less obvious gap which the writer would like filled is that of 'topographical music'—compositions evoking the 'spirit of place', such as Bax's Tintagel. More important to the landscape, urban or social historian are the comments on places by tourists and travellers in the past, published in innumerable itineraries. These have been exhaustively listed, but in such a way as to prevent easy access to material on individual localities, so that topographical indexing of these is desirable. One has only to reflect on the importance of people to local history to realize the value of a place index of diaries and autobiographies, but standard bibliographies of these9 are not, as yet, indexed by place.

Copyright law should ensure that all printed works are adequately recorded in the national bibliography, but it must be admitted that in the past this has not always been the case. Privately printed publications, some of which are on local topics, have not always been meticulously acquired or, where obtained, listed in BNB. A retrospective index to such items would be useful.

Whether anything can be done to provide a bibliographical magnet to find the local studies needle in these and other publications haystacks depends upon a number of factors. Comprehensive indexing may never be achieved, but some improvement on the present inadequate provision should be possible, once those in a position to affect the issue are aware of the need. Where a computer is used, for instance, suitable programming should transform the situation, given the will.

Use of indexing

One desirable preliminary is identification of the potential use of such indexing: which are the categories of people concerned to find local material, and how many of them are there? Admittedly, only so many local studies departments exist in public libraries in the country as a whole, but their number (and that of subscribers to an appropriate compilation) is swelled by academic libraries and departments at all levels, by record offices, museums, newspapers and many societies in the humanities. Incalculable numbers of local historians, geographers, etc., exist, and would take advantage of such works. It is posterity, and its researchers, who would derive benefit from any development.

Possible solutions

No glib solutions are offered here to the problems involved; the present author defers readily to the superior technical knowledge and administrative expertise of readers of The Indexer. He merely indicates a need, and solicits individual thought and collective consideration on their part, with a view to ameliorating the plight of potential users now and in the future of much valuable material, and providing local studies, at all levels, with a much-needed 'tool of the trade'. In order to encourage such consideration, however, and to stimulate ideas, a few possible approaches are indicated. Reaction to these—even outright rejection—may lead at least to partial progress in one direction or another. None would be sufficient by itself to provide comprehensively; even collectively they would leave gaps, while none suggests itself as readily implementable in current circumstances. Yet taken seriatim they may offer contributions to a total solution which is impossible without some acceptance of the need.

Ideally, one supposes, there would be a national bibliographical centre, charged with the duty of organizing the cataloguing and indexing of all publications, in all media, to provide indirect access to them. No one imagines that such a development is imminently likely, however desirable it might be accepted as being. Eventually, perhaps, there may be a greatly expanded range of printed and/or computerized indexes supplementing BHI, BEI, CTI, ASSIAC, The Times Index and other analyses of current publications, but adding topographical entries where these are not now supplied might have a prohibitive impact on editorial and printing costs. Some increase in the number of such entries might be feasible, however, and lead to wider sales. Consciousness of the need, it might be hoped, could prompt policy adjustments, adaptations, developments. For instance, some at least of the index entries made at present have less
potentially direct value than the topographical, for the
same material, and might be substituted. At the very
least, awareness of possibilities, linked with editorial
decisions within index publishing offices, may act like
crystals' accretion within a chemical solution, and lead to
growth of a service to provide part at least of what is
required.

Co-operation is another approach of potential value.
Within, say, a county, all indexers working in libraries,
record offices, museums, galleries, etc., might collaborate
to:

(a) Determine the journals and/or other materials of
greatest source potential

(b) Liaise to ensure access to these within the institu-
tions concerned

(c) Contribute topographical entries for those taken
locally, to a common index: a suitable computer pro-
gramme should facilitate this.

Currently, local studies librarians attempt vainly to
work out their own salvation, enlisting the voluntary
collaboration of colleagues and library users in garnering
here an illustration from a denominational journal, there
an article from a geological periodical, a statistical table
from an economic society's transactions, an editorial
from a welfare society newsletter, and so on. They need
this, of course, but they also need much more—hence
this appeal, because without regular, automatic, system-
atic supplementation of locally available resources the
quality of local studies carried out will be haphazard and
problematical, dependent on serendipity rather than
professionalism. Since the range of potential sources is so
wide and the extent of their availability so problematical,
in every area, a coherent overall policy of topographical
indexing is essential to adequacy of consequent publica-
tions.

Members of the Society of Indexers are obviously
those in the best position to view the indexing situation
as a whole, and be able to suggest methods towards an
overall solution. As those most closely connected with
the preparation and publication of indexes, and so best
able to assess the possibilities, they could probably
collaborate to identify and record the services at present
operative in each area, and the most feasible develop-
ments from these. They would know, better than others,
how far computerized methods could provide more
automatic incorporation of topographical entries in
extant indexes. Contributions to The Indexer might take
more account of place names than hitherto; library
school courses might place greater emphasis on this
aspect of their expertise. Should there be further alter-
atives, not mentioned here, only indexers are likely to
know of them. If research be needed to provide the
groundwork on which consideration could be based,
they are the colleagues who would be able to steer
postgraduate students in that direction, or even obtain
grant assistance to enable this to be carried out.

Whatever solutions (if any) are found and implemen-
ted, there will probably remain the retrospective, one-off
indexes to be compiled. Is it too much to hope that
individual indexers, with a personal interest in one of the
categories of material (and access to them) might con-
sider an approach to appropriate bodies with a view to
their publishing an index?

This author offers no answers, only questions, but he is
confident that, if the will exists, means can and will be
found to improve the present situation, being a firm
believer in 'Cashmore's Law'. That former City
Librarian of Birmingham, in his time a champion of
sound indexing, once pronounced the theory, 'If you
want to do a thing sufficiently, you can usually find a way
of doing it, but if you don't, it's confoundedly easy to
find excuses'. To this the present writer would venture to
add, 'Whoever sees a need to be met has the first
responsibility for seeking a solution to the problem, and
of drawing it to the attention of those who are in a
position to remedy the situation'. Hence this article.

References and notes

1. Engineering, cxxxvii (26 Jan 1934) 85; and Bradford, S. C.
   Documentation, Crosby Lockwood 1948, 146.
2. This article could be regarded as an example of the
   phenomenon.
3. British Humanities Index, for instance, analyses only a
   proportion of the titles listed in Willings Press Guide, e.g.
   Archaeology (11 out of 27); Geography (2 out of 10);
   Geology (1 out of 15); History (15 out of 46).
4. The range of published periodical indexes readily available
to local studies librarians is rarely impressive.
5. e.g., Eagle, Dorothy and Carnell, Hilary. The Oxford
   literary guide to the British Isles. Revised by Dorothy
   musical gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland. David and
   Charles, 1981.
6. Historical Manuscripts Commission. Architectural history
   and the fine and applied arts: sources in the National
   Register of Archives. 4v. 1969–76.
7. e.g., Pratt, Derrick and Veysey, A. G. A handbook of the
   Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documen-
   tation Centres: United Kingdom Branch. Newsletter no.
   Seattle: Washington University Press, 3v., 1935–49. V.3,
   Great Britain.
    bibliography of British autobiographies published or written
    Matthews, W. comp. British diaries: an annotated biblio-
    graphy of British diaries written between 1442 and 1942.

J. F. W. Bryon is a retired Librarian, Library School
Lecturer and library journalist.