BS 1749:1985

In his guest editorial in the April, 1988 issue of The Indexer our President refers, quite correctly, to my unwillingness to accept some of the recommendations of the revised BS 1749 (on alphabetical arrangement)—namely the arrangement of 'Me' and 'St.' as spelt. I hope that I am no indexer's Col. Blimp, resisting steadfastly all attempts at change—but I do baulk at this one. The filing of such contractions as 'Mc', 'Mr', 'St' as if they were spelt out in full is long established as a device to assist the users of alphabetical sequences and it does seem to me that the only reason for changing the convention stems from the inability of the computer to cope.

My own submission to the British Standards Institution in September 1983 on the draft of this standard included the following comment on this clause:

The convention of arranging these contractions (particularly 'Mc', 'Mac') in a single sequence is so well established that it should not be disturbed merely to accommodate computerized filing; the absurdity of separating 'McDonald' from 'MacDonald' in a Scottish telephone directory for instance is surely obvious to all. The computerized filing system of the BNB does not require this separation and files the 'Macs' in one sequence (Blaise filing rules).

I am sure that I am not alone in this view and indeed I know that our colleague John Gordon sent in a similar comment at the same time to BSI. Perhaps I may end with another extract from my own submission:

A general comment—these rules have obviously been heavily influenced by the needs of the computer and whilst this is of obvious importance it will be very regrettable if the constraints of computer programming are allowed to dictate; the computer is an aid and should be used to produce what is required rather than being permitted to overrule the requirements of scholarship—the tool is wagging the god! In any case, manual indexing is far from dead and this fact should be recognized.

Geoffrey Dixon
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Indexes—are they wanted?

Archivists, who spend their lives ferreting valuable information out of ancient papers in the treasure-houses that are our county and national record offices, might be expected to be more interested in indexes than most people. Indeed, one might think it would be the first thing they would look for in a book on an archival topic. Examination of a recent number of Archives (that for October 1987) did not exactly bear out that theory, however. In all 28 works were reviewed, but indexes were mentioned for good or ill in only 12 of them. Four of these simply said that there was an index; one said 'there is no index' while another review delivered a considerable smack at a book without one. One index was said to be the 'weak point' of a book; another was said to be not so easy to use as wished; one index was sadly confined to new accessions to the Record Office, while another was promised later. Only one index was named as excellent and one other was praised as of high standard.

No signs of obsession with indexes and indexing there! Are we peculiar in that we think it important to be able to retrieve information, or is it that the ordinary person is never taught at school (or at home) what a useful thing an index can be?

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Places in their place

When I saw the title of J. F. W. Bryon's 'Topographical indexing' in the October 1987 issue (pp. 211-14), the likely problems that sprang to mind were that delicious set to do with changes of name, variant spellings, vernacular/conventional, identification/distinction (places with same name), and mechanisms to secure the most helpful filing order. I was harking back to my library cataloguing days; but such matters concern indexers too in such fields as pictures in sources covering a wide chronological span.

What I found was no less familiar and interesting than expected, but I wonder whether the Bryon problems might be more readily solved if regarded as belonging to library acquisitions/procurement/subject cataloguing rather than indexing. Certainly any special librarian, preoccupied with any subject field, not just places, would be aware of them.

As usual, motivation is all. If one is really keen to discover everything relevant to one's collection, one sets people to scan systematically all conceivable indexing and abstracting media, national bibliographies, auction catalogues, booksellers' catalogues—and not just their indexes, if they have any. One sends people halfway round the world to search public record offices, national and lesser, with a view to getting selected material copied. One encourages and joins bands of scholars preparing guides to collections, both public and private. One keeps poised for opportunism. One of my last jobs as my library's person in London in 1957 was urgent
searching of captured German documents then about to be returned. (I specially recall the awfulness of trying to learn German handwriting on the job. Fortunately my successor was a real linguist.)

The message is: don’t be defeatist. There’s much a library can do, at the public relations level, to increase awareness of what it collects. A library can try to deserve enough prestige and affection for authors, including journalists, to take pains to ensure that their relevant publications, including offprints of articles in recondite serials, are deposited. Blanket order and press clipping services aren’t usually the long-term answer, though always worth trying. The products of the national press can be indexed selectively in-house, and it’s amazing what assorted staff can scavenge in the way of items in local (suburban) papers and very specialist publications of the out-of-the-way clubs and so forth to which they belong.

It is important to own all these items, not just have news of them through indexes, because only the library’s staff know its needs well enough to provide adequate access. The library will have, in its catalogues and self-filing collections, its own methods for distinguishing towns, suburbs, buildings, etc. with the same name. It will have its own lore and hard-won experience in its area of interest (for instance, which Phillip Island? Hawaii when? and the edifying connexion between the various places in Australia called Mosman/Mossman). Its staff will develop special skills in the speedy recognition of the lapses and follies of disinterested indexers.

Equipping a library to do the things I’ve suggested, including its own indexing, is expensive (but cumulative) and requires boundless enthusiasm. But I’m sure the satisfaction of needs lies in that direction rather than in passing the buck to indexers in general, who are probably serving all the masters they can already.

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Indexing implication

Indexers have expressed worry about their own legal liability when indicating the presence in the text of libellous assertions. The caution observed in this regard in a recently published volume, of omitting the names in the text where libel was possible, gives rise to further difficulties in alphabetization.

In Honeytrap: the secret worlds of Stephen Ward by A. Summers and S. Dorril (Weidenfeld, 1987), the names of eleven people featured in the text are replaced by long dashes and asterisks leading to footnotes reading, in ten cases, ‘Name deleted for legal reasons’, and in one, ‘Name deleted for personal security’. All the passages need to be indexed, however; so all are found together under A, thus:

- anonymous:
  - Lord (‘sinister bisexual’), 121
  - (friend of Lord Astor), 161
  - (Hungarian woman), 191
  - (lesbians), 149, 217
  - (former MI6 operative), 151–3
  - (minister who offered to resign), 4, 209
  - (model), 54
  - (Conservative MP), 118, 133, 212
  - (member of the Royal Family), 211
  - (Conservative Secretary of State), 213
  - (solicitor), 209

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D.I.Y. training for book indexing

Absurdly late in the day, I have just (early June, 1988) read Norman Knight’s last work, Indexing, The Art of, so ably revised and indexed by Tony Raven. This covers the whole subject from the practical point of view so thoroughly that I believe it would provide an excellent short cut to training, appealing particularly, perhaps, to some of the younger aspirants.

The novice should first select a very short book (70–125 pages, say) having no index or a poor or skimpy one, and fairly quickly compile an index for it based only on ideas derived from having used other books with indexes. Suitable topics might be Pets, or Gardening, or First Aid, or Cooking, or Camping. A number of difficulties and snags and uncertainties will undoubtedly be encountered. These are finger-posts to improvement.

Then the budding indexer should read Norman Knight’s book carefully twice, but leaving out chapters 8, 9, and 10: first quickly right through, and then again, even more carefully, and slowly this time, with pauses for note-taking. All this would, of course, be done against the background of the tentative index already prepared. Finally the prospective applicant should make another index of the same book, guided by what has been learned and with frequent consultation of... The Art of, with a view to Accreditation.

Many, no doubt, will prefer a professional training course that runs in stages, with all the advantages that individual tutoring brings. But the suggested procedure might suit students who at the time found it difficult to accept a more closely controlled training regime.

I regret the five years’ delay in making this suggestion, because I knew Norman well enough to know how pleased he would have been to think that, even from the grave, he was helping the young indexer to advance a little more quickly and more assuredly.

Neil R. Fisk
Pinner

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