Indexing biographies: lives do bring their problems

Hazel K. Bell

Considers biography as a particular genre to which standard indexing practices, developed for structured bodies of technical knowledge, are not always applicable. Indexes to biographies raise particular problems of length of text, selection and terminology of entries, arrangement and number of subheadings, extended continuity, layout, and need for discretion, and may require unique, specific solutions.

Indexing biographies is a *genre* of its own, differing in many ways from the indexing of technical subjects: structured bodies of knowledge. Its subject specialism is one of appropriate techniques and style rather than a claim to knowledge of all the lives that have been lived. Biographical indexers deal with *narrative prose about people*, as also do history and fiction; but fiction, alas, is generally unindexed, while history *is* more of a subject specialism, with specified rules and known content.

The other characteristic chiefly distinguishing this genre from technical indexing is the matter of length. Whereas subject specialist texts may come in article, essay or handbook form, indexers of biographies deal with whole-book units—or even multi-volume. Mere length brings problems of complexity: more difficulty than cumulation of a series of discrete units, as in periodical indexing; we have extended continuity to deal with. It is the relationship of the index to the text contents that is of greatest importance in biographical indexing, while in technical, the structure of the index itself seems to be of greater concern.

There has been little published on biography: at a conference on the subject in 1985 the lack of study of such a widely-published form was commented on.[1] The *indexing* of biography has been even less studied: text-books and training courses seem mainly focused on technical indexing and subject specialisms; searching the literature yielded only a few passages on it; no sustained consideration of the subject.

With technical indexing, one can index according to precept, and *there is a right answer*, as implied by the standards, like marking a maths exam. But in indexing narrative prose about people, each will make different subjective decisions, interpret and value the text by his individual judgment—there can be no sole correct answer, any more than there can be in writing an essay. Indeed, the process seems to me to resemble essay or

article writing. First one must assemble facts, rough notes; then rearrange, group, fill out, edit, write. The first jottings are mere notes, indications, of what entries may be, or where they will start—not, necessarily, end, yet. I assemble lists of page references and tentative subheadings, but cannot tell till I have them all how finely detailed the breakdown can be, which will group with which.

Selection of entries

The first essential in indexing a lengthy text with a continuous theme seems to be familiarity with its full development; I would hope always to read the whole book through at least once before starting indexing. Then, how to pick out items for inclusion?

In narrative prose about people, sustained through a whole book, topics are not considered, concluded and dismissed, but sustained throughout the book; it is a stage that the major characters rarely leave, and they must be constantly monitored and recorded, even in the background. We are at once noting the arrival and departure of the minor characters and incidents, listing both *mentions*—easy-to-spot names—and ongoing topics—much more difficult to keep in mind, continue through pages without specific reference. These may even be abstract, developing concepts, perhaps not named as such in the text—beginnings of war, spell of freak weather, decline of popularity (a subhead).

Terminology

Names, of course, give many particular problems in indexing biographies. Women who marry, changing their names—maybe more than once; people who are ennobled; writers who use pseudonyms; they must all be findable under whichever name they are sought, by the use of cross-references; and identified when reached, as the person originally sought under another name, by confirmation in brackets—(*née*, formerly, later, etc., with other versions). For several members of the same family, with the same name, it is best to specify in brackets their

relationship to the major character (father of BB, niece of BB). This breaks up long columns of the same name with helpful information, especially for readers who may be looking for, say, the mother of the character without knowing her forename. The subjects of biographies may not be famed, their families even less so. The index to Barbara Pym's diary was also a glossary, as described in a previous issue of this journal.[2]

Names may need expansion or explanation, supplementary research for missing information: the grandfather on which side of the hero's family, therefore which surname? What are the surnames of his school-friend Albert, young Penny the maid? Such matters are supposed to need research by the indexer, who may charge for the time spent on it. I consider it better to list such queries and send them to the author, as: (1) the indexer's schedule is usually too tight to allow time to go to a library and delve; (2) the author will have access to all the relevant papers, and know what sources best to consult, and where; (3) it is even salutary to make the author realize that these details are lacking! He should not only supply them for the index, but may be glad of the reminder to insert the information into the text.

Indexing narrative (and subjectively written) prose is entirely different from indexing scientific writing, where agreed items may be specified for reference, sometimes even automatically spotted and flagged by computer, and the chief technique is the structural arrangement of known items. Indexers of biographies can find no list of preferred, specified terms, as each life and its events are unique. For a list of favourite books, a computer would list each author/title, but the human indexer would simply generalize as, perhaps, FAVOURITE READING. All human life is there—behaviour, relationships, emotions—to be specified and labelled. Words used in the headings for prose about people may not even appear in text; we supply such generalizing terms as CHARACTER, CAREER, ADOLESCENCE, HEALTH, CHILDHOOD, FAMILY, HOBBIES, SOCIAL LIFE. To devise such terms involves analysis, summary, interpretation. Even these terms are ambiguous; for instance, does MARRIAGE refer to the wedding, or the whole marriage relationship and years; or is it a landmark—all references following this one refer to the character in his married state? HEALTH, of course, may be the entry indicating a list of illnesses. FAMILY—does that imply the subject's parents and siblings, early in the book, or children, later? We cannot go by Keywords.

There is some degree of evaluation, or need for discretion, in choosing terms. In one man's life, I had the delicate problem of his living with the woman who would have been his second wife, except that his first wife was in a mental home and, at that time, undivorceable. The second woman's name was discreetly not given in the book; so I had to include her under his entry, and could not put 'second marriage' as it wasn't. I could only think of 'second affaire' or 'second liaison', and used that, but

it seemed unduly censorious! Delicately written text about relationships has to be bluntly labelled in the index. The author may write subtly, but we cannot hint. HOMOSEXUALITY may have to trumpet what two pages of text delicately imply—and thus introduce a libel risk.

History indexing is easier because the reader knows what to expect; one can use dates, such as 1815, meaningfully; the sequences of subheadings under entries are those *expected*. Biographies of the less known need more informative terms.

Our choice of term implies choice of *emphasis* of one feature of the many considered in each paragraph or section. Our hero writes a letter to his old nanny describing a visit to a peer-friend in his stately home. For names, we cite those he describes at the party; for ongoing breakdown reference—letters from hero? Relationship with former nanny? Describes stately home? What happens there? Which, or all? We make constant decisions, interpreting the text for the reader by our selection and by our phraseology.

We should consider which possible question by the reader we are answering: (a) where can I find what I know is in this book?—the easier task: he knows what to look for, you have only to put it in the likeliest place; or (b) what does this book tell me about the chap? Here our choice of terms must be more informative.

Arrangement of subheadings

With biography (more than with history) there are likely to be a few subjects with an enormous majority of the entries, so that they have half a column or more of subheadings to be arranged. Carey declares the compilation of these 'the task that calls for the indexer's highest skill of all'.[3] It seems generally agreed that alphabetical arrangement of subheadings should give way to *chronological* for biographies. For one thing, alphabetical arrangement is helpful only if you know what the entries are likely to be: climate/history/population of a country. But it is at best confusing, at worst ridiculous, to list for a person:

> death, dental problems, divorce, marriage, meets future wife, schooldays

and chronological arrangement will coincide roughly with the events of the book, producing a minor narrative in itself, easy to follow.

A first decision is whether to give each reference a separate subhead, or whether they can be *grouped*, subdivided in stages. Grouping in stages rather than singly specifying can be a tempting method of dealing with enormously long lists of references, if one could take the whole thing as continuous. *Division into years* is tempting, especially in a life-time book. It is helpful if the reader may be expected to have enough relevant knowledge for the date to mean something—1935–40 and after will be meaningful—or if you can add, '1955–6, in

America'; '1957, returns to England'; '1958–60, attempts to enter Parliament'. Most people's lives, alas, are not so chronologically tidy.

Indexes have been condemned for affecting the function of a contents list; but this seems to me helpful, in the absence of very detailed contents lists, or chapter summaries such as Victorian novels used to have—one rarely sees these now, and they would be unlikely to be read against the index. A full content-index is helpful to those readers who do *not* know what to expect to find.

Some take the easiest way of all to arrange entries—in order of occurrence, no messing. This will not help the reader who does not know what entries to expect, so does not know where to look for them; nor where entries occur where one would not expect them—the funeral of the character anticipated in the introduction, for instance—even his entire career there summarized.

Usually collation is possible; and several successive, though separate, references to RELATIONS WITH MOTHER, VISITS TO SUSSEX, ATTACKS OF RHEUMATISM, can be brought together. On the principle of classification, it can even be helpful to assemble long lists under subheadings—I subsumed all references to the hero's drinking, and his wife's illnesses and operations, in a recent index, and the length of the entries, running right through the book, told their own tale. But if you group like this, through the years, chronology becomes difficult—arranging by chronological order of first entries means you keep going back to start again.

Layout

Chronological arrangement with a narrative form implies *setting run-on*, to reinforce the narrative reading effect. Indented style is best suited to alphabetical order, where *expected* headings have keywords brought to the front; in narrative form this gives a staccato, disjointed effect. I would always set indexes to biographies run-on; the continuous *sequence* here is more important than the actual terms for the items entered, unlike technical indexing. The narrative effect also involves retaining prepositions, now disallowed in indented subheadings. Some charming examples of narrative subheadings have been quoted in this journal, particularly from indexes to Boswell and Pepys.[4,5]

Sub-subheadings may be indicated in run-on by the use of brackets and commas, or repetition of the subheading, or by the use of paragraphing. I divide long biographical entries into sections, starting each on a new line, with its own title in small caps, such as: CAREER, CHARACTER, RELATIONSHIPS, WRITINGS. I use different principles of arrangement within these sections—chronological for career, with all the difficulties already mentioned. The order in which to list books written or films made may be difficult to select. Alphabetical is easier, and with known titles, readers may know where to look in the list for what they seek. But the chronological

arrangement may indicate the development of the writer or actor, may encapsulate his career. For informed readers, this will be more helpful and interesting.

I now do list special sections of *relationships* with people, blunt as this seems, as so many are important and worth singling out. These I list alphabetically, by surname, but not inverting the names.

The section that I have called in my last index CHARACTER AND TASTES, which includes appearance, generosity, love of reading, hobbies, voice, illnesses—personal matters—I arrange by a sense of logic, grouping like with like (voice, singing, poetry; drinking, smoking, sexuality). Appearance I usually begin with, as it's a constant, and begins, happily, with *a*. But items of this sort cannot go in a chronological arrangement, unless specifically meaning 'appearance at 20, at 30, at 40'. Even then I think they would be better grouped together—classified. Their order of occurrence in the text is too random, no help as a finding aid.

Another individual method of breaking up long entries for major characters, by the use of typography, is described by Dr L. F. Powell in his index to the 1950 revision of Hill's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson:*

> To facilitate consultation of the very long articles on the major characters, letters, corresponding to the initials of the keywords of the entries, are inserted in their appropriate places; these, and the important keywords themselves, are printed in heavy type, e.g. 'BOSWELL: **A** account of himself; **B** enters at the bar; **C** visits Cambridge; **D** buys Dalblair; **drinking:** a lover of wine.[5]

Robert Latham had to contend with biographical indexing problems on a huge scale in dealing with Samuel Pepys's diary, and his success won him the Wheatley Medal for 1983. He explained the particular techniques he evolved in two articles in *The Indexer:*

> The principal entries concerning him are listed on the page following the preface to the volume. They include PEPYS, SAMUEL, RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY LIFE; DIARY; CORRESPONDENCE; and SEX LIFE.[6]

> He had to be dealt with for the most part under a series of distinct headings—HEALTH, DIARY, CLERK OF THE ACTS, BOOKS, MUSIC and so on—though in the end a small entry headed PEPYS, SAMUEL proved to be a useful container for references to his life before the diary period.[7]

The main character

This is the one question of indexing biographies that does often receive consideration in texts on indexing. Carey denounced long entries for the major character of a biography as 'overloading', and suggested they should be omitted, or restricted to entries which could not go under any other heading, such as his birth, character, honours.[3,8] Knight[9,10] and Anderson[11] both support this. Such an omission seems to me simply to be increasing the deplorable lack of indexes by adding a new category,

partially unindexed books. There is often a second major character in a biography—wife or colleague. How odd to have a full entry for the minor character, not for the major: a book on Thomas Carlyle featuring Jane more largely than Thomas in the index—or even casual visitors. Carey suggested that most entries for the main character could go under other headings—even for the hero's marriage, you look for his wife's name in the index, which you know will be Mrs ——.[3] But with other matters, you will not know what to seek out. What of other close relationships, without benefit of same surname?

Knight complained that it was 'not pretty to find' 38 references to catching, escaping from, or being treated for, the pox, under 'Boswell', and that 'these had better been relegated to an entry under the letter "V" '.[9,10] Under the main entry for an illness I would expect to find general matters—consideration of its symptoms, history, treatment and effects, not of one individual's suffering from it. One could look under the illness for the character's bouts only if one already knew of his experience of it.

The advocates of transfer of the main character's references to other entries suggest explaining this in a prefatory note. I am sure that most users, going through the indexes to a pile of books in a library in search of some particular item, do *not* first consult notes at the tops of the indexes. Such notes seem to me sacred, unconsulted cows.

Strings and loose ends

Often, many trivial references remain after all suitable subheadings have been bestowed. I do believe these should be listed, for completeness. One could put *mentioned*, but it's a long word, and its use bestows undue importance; though this would have the advantage of taking the string of trivial references to the end of the entry. In fact, with no subhead, this list of numbers will actually come first after the character's name, instead of last, where it rightly belongs; probably its first appearance after the name suggests to the reader that it has the maximum importance. Or do readers realize that the more important references are those with subheadings? Another disadvantage of no-subhead-first; the one you pick out to subhead as most important may be the first chronologically. So,

John Smith 7, 17, 27, 37, 47; childhood, 5

—implies quite the wrong order. It should be 'childhood, 5; *also mentioned* . . .'. Have we any means of conveying this? The many references not worth specifying might ideally be tucked chronologically between the relevant subheadings, in brackets; for instance:

Wedding 50; honeymoon 51; return to London 52; search for work 54; (55, 57, 59, 62) [which are minor references not worth the space, effort and importance

of subheadings, but chronologically fall between the work search on 54 and the next subheading], starts work as porter 69.

The generally protested abhorrence of *strings* seems overdone to me. There may be, say, twelve references to a minor character in the life. You want the character to appear in the index, as he is there in the book—twelve times, totalling the importance of a single entry. He, his friends, scholars later researching him, may well want to know of all the references. You hear you should not have more than five before you sub-divide. How shall you do this?

Specify the references with subheadings? You look at each of the twelve (which takes a lot of time, and is itself an argument for paying by the hour, not by the visible result)—and find that none stands out as especially important, meriting any particular sub-entry. To give these would bestow unwarranted apparent importance on them in the index. Pick out just one or two references for subheads, purely for the sake of subtraction, to reduce the number left in the string? One might choose convenient subheadings for three—AT SCHOOL WITH BB, AT BB'S WEDDING, LETTER TO BB—while another character, with only these same three references, does not have them so subdivided (three being permissible), although his references are of the same weight as those of the twelve-times-appearing. This gives a distorted effect of importance to those entries, whereas there should be a true correspondence between the importance of a character in the text, and the space he occupies in the index. Surely we should accord subheads on the basis of the importance of the entry itself rather than merely to distinguish an unimportant reference from other unimportant ones? It should be itself a mark of intrinsic worthiness-of-consultation.

You could divide into stages, if the appearances are chronologically convenient—'In X's childhood; at university; during war; later years'. But again, think how much space the words of sub-entries take, compared with the number of page-references you could get in their space—and how much less informative!

Another possible strategy to avoid strings is the temptation to streamline under false pretences. 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, would be condemned as a string; 8–17 instead would be acceptable—but may be far less accurate.

The obvious message of an index entry is, 'information on this topic can be found on this page'. The sub-message is, 'It's got a subheading taking up the space of several page numbers—it must be important, well worth turning to'. A string of undifferentiated entries (in a conscientiously compiled index, that is) has its own, honest message: 'these are twelve minor references to this person, none of which is worth emphasizing by a subheading'.

Inclusion

Extraneous matter such as prologue, acknowledgements, illustrations and appendices usually qualifies for inclusion in the index to a biography. I index anyone in the acknowledgements who also appears in the text; I would not index the thanks to the author's wife for keeping the children quiet while he wrote, but would include reference to the widow of the main character who had made his papers available and answered questions about him; that is relevant to his life and relationships. Illustrations should surely be included, to indicate, not so much their position, as that there are pictures of the characters to be found. It can be difficult to get even a list of the illustrations from the publisher in time for the index, let alone the captions or the pictures themselves. If at all possible, I simply include *il.* at the end of the relevant entries to indicate that a search through the illustrations (easy to detect!) will be rewarded.

In fact, since indexers analyse the text as closely as any likely reader, it seems hard that we are so often denied the adjuncts that can throw such helpful light on it— illustrations and maps.

Conclusions

These are the problems I have found in indexing biographies, in the areas of choice of terms, arrangement of subheadings, and layout. They all arise from the particular nature of indexing whole-book narrative prose about people, unique lives and characters that cannot be standardized, and seem to require solutions different from the standard practices advocated for dealing with structured bodies of standard knowledge.

References

1. Homberger, Eric, and John Charmely, eds. *The troubled face of biography.* Macmillan, 1988.
2. 'Thankless task' accomplished for Pym. *The Indexer* **14** (3) April 1985, 189.
3. Carey, G. V. No room at the top. *The Indexer* **2** (4) Autumn 1961, 120–3.
4. Narration by index. *The Indexer* **13** (2) Oct. 1982, 114.
5. de Beer, E. S. Dr Powell's index to Boswell's *Life of Johnson. The Indexer* **5** (3) Spring 1967, 135–40.
6. Latham, Robert, and Rosalind Latham. Indexing Pepys' diary. *The Indexer* **12** (1) April 1980, 34–5.
7. Latham, Robert. 'The index to the definitive Pepys'. *The Indexer* **14** (2) Oct. 1984, 88–90.
8. Carey, G. V. *Making an index.* CUP, 1963. 6.
9. Knight, G. Norman. Indexing the life of Sir Winston Churchill. *The Indexer* **5** (2) Autumn 1966, 58–63.
10. Knight, G. Norman. *Indexing, the art of.* Allen & Unwin, 1979. 53.
11. Anderson, M. D. *Book indexing.* CUP, 1971. 23.

Hazel Bell is a freelance indexer specializing in biography, and editor of The Indexer.

Opposition to indexes

[Victor Gollancz] ignored the trivial complaint that the book [*My Dear Timothy*, Gollancz, 1952] lacked an index. Victor, for reasons of economy, did not approve of indexes; and in the case of his own book this dislike was compounded by his reluctance to have people dipping into it and thus destroying the symphonic construction. The wildly unchronological *Tims* put up almost impenetrable barriers to use as works of reference.

(Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz. A Biography.* Gollancz, 1987, p. 593)

It should be added that, despite coming from the Gollancz stable, Ms Edwards' biography is comprehensively indexed—even perhaps 'over-indexed', since the titles of books (both by Victor Gollancz himself and by others) are fully indexed under both author *and* title. The chapters dealing with his publishing ventures reflect some of the idiosyncracies of the book world (not just the eccentricities of Gollancz) and will be of particular interest to indexers.

J.A.V.

Subject retrieval at work

The British Library Document Supply Centre offers one-stop information shopping, supplying requests from more than 12,000 industrial, public, government and academic customers in 140 countries of the world. Its stock is vast, occupying 100 miles of shelving and 1,700 miles of microfilm. Its journals listing alone contains over 10,000 titles on chemistry and chemical engineering, 8,000 on biomedical research, 30,000 on other biosciences and over 40,000 on engineering. It has 3,000,000 reports on microfilm, 500,000 theses, 300,000 conference proceedings—and 100,000 music scores.

And from this stock it finds specific information, sometimes from the scantiest clues.

One request from a customer who had tried extensively in the USA read: 'Observations on the agricultural conditions liable to influence aflatoxin development on groundnuts in Senegal ... all the information we have ...are desperate ... help'. The paper, which was from a UNICEF meeting in 1963, was quickly found.

In another request, all the leads the customer could give were the words 'Eric' and 'Cause'; the date, venue and authorship of the conference paper were not known. 'It took us ten minutes to find the paper,' says Marketing Executive Alan Reeves. 'It turned out to be a paper on "People, creativity and quality with technology", given in St Louis, Missouri in 1981. I told the customer that if they'd said it had a green cover, we'd have found it even sooner!'