Indexing biographies

The article on indexing biographies in the April issue touched on the problem of indexing the nobility. I have just finished a book that referred unrelatedly to the same person as 'Edward Wood', 'Lord Irwin' and 'Lord Halifax'.

We all know the 'proper' way to index titled people and, although it can take up time, I greatly enjoy the detective work called for in discovering the correct style and title of some Duke or Viscount or to illustrate my close acquaintance with such matters by distinguishing between an Earl's daughter and a Baron's wife. It can be very satisfying to make such an entry; one may even be so carried away by it as to imagine it adds a little lustre to an otherwise prosaic index. But are we not often deluded into doing this because indexers' lore says we should and we don't want to appear amateurish?

Clearly, some scholarly works or histories spanning generations require each holder of a title to be distinguished from the others, but I find it odd that a character to whom the author refers merely as Lord X, and who, in the context of the text, cannot be mistaken for his son or father, has to be 'given the works' by being indexed under the name adopted for his title, Christian names, family name and then the number and style of his title. This takes up a lot of time and space. When the author can get away with, say, 'Lord Londonderry', why should we have to index him as 'Londonderry, Charles Stewart Henry Vane-Tempest-Stewart, 7th Marquess of'? In most cases it is meretricious and pretentious and nothing would be lost by repeating the simple form used by the author. After all, in what way is it a help to the reader? The index should not aim to be more precise than the book itself. Could it be that we do it this way so that authors and publishers will think we are exponents of some esoteric art?

This article was especially welcome, as I feel The Indexer tends to treat the back-of-book indexer rather as a member of the lower orders. So many of its articles are specialized and seem to be slanted towards librarians.

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The distinction between 'technical' and 'narrative' indexing seems to me a useful one we need to keep in view, lest those of us in the humanities get swept along by the sheer weight of numbers on the scientific side. The question of 'inclusion' is a tricky one with any historical text, because of the difficulty (impossibility?) of determining what is likely to prove insignificant (a statement which is perhaps cryptic enough to demand expansion on some future occasion).

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The article, 'Indexing biographies', which appeared in the April 1989 issue (pp. 168-72), is sure to become a classic. It touches on all the major issues in indexing this genre and includes many original ideas, the most interesting of which are: (1) that indexers may be subject to libel suits for translating delicately phrased text into concrete terms; (2) that the type of index entry should determine whether run-on or indented style is used.

The opinions expressed on chronological sub-arrangement and on what I consider the key question in indexing biographies—should the biographee get an entry?—are very cogent. Another classic paper from The Indexer, J. Mills' article on indexing and classification, is highly relevant to this question, in my view. Indexes should complement the logical arrangement of a book rather than replicate it, and applying the principles of chain indexing would justify entries such as 'Birth: [Biographee]'. The Indexer has, however, also featured an article on the application of chain indexing to Library and Information Science Abstracts, which describes the flipping of entries such as 'Biographies: Librarians'.

The case made for the information conveyed by undifferentiated references is very strong, but the principle that a string of locators without subheadings suggests minor references would have to be adopted by the members of indexing award juries, who automatically reject a book with six locators per entry. It also brings to mind my attempts to solicit entries for this year's Wilson Award by contacting ASI freelancers. One informed me that she had done a great index to a biography, but the author deleted all the subheadings she had assigned to persons with numerous references because he felt the inclusion of subheadings could be interpreted as favoritism for certain characters in the book!
Many of the assumptions about the types of information the index-user is likely to be seeking seem correct, but I find these assumptions reminiscent of Phyllis Richmond’s article that appeared prior to the publication of AACR2, in which she made the point that cataloging codes are devised by a bunch of librarians who sit around a room and say, ‘I think the user would look it up this way’, rather than being based on user studies.3 The article provides a great deal of raw material for research on index-users.

‘Indexing biographies’ will be featured in the next edition of the syllabus for my indexing course at St John’s University, and I shall discuss the many interesting points raised in the article with my students.

References
3. Richmond, Phyllis Allen. Mr Dewey’s classification, Mr Cutter’s catalog, and Dr Hitchcock’s chickens. Library Resources and Technical Services 21, Spring 1977, 107-19.

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Indexers’ rights

Dorothy Seddon, who complains of editorial interference in the publication of her index (The Indexer 16 (3) April 89, 206-7), asks, ‘What safeguards are we going to have against interference of this kind?’ She may well find the answer in the Moral Rights chapter of the new British Copyright Act 1988. Section 80 of the Act says that authors shall not have their work subject to ‘derogatory treatment’ which it defines as ‘distortion or mutilation prejudicial to the honour of the author’.

I would have thought that indexers should have no difficulty in establishing themselves as authors of their indexes.

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Mr Jack Black, Chairman of the British Literary and Artistic Copyright Association, spoke to a meeting of the Society of Indexers on 1 December 1988, on the subject of copyright law as it affects UK indexers. A report of his talk appears in the SI Newsletter No. 1, Winter 1989.—Ed.

D.I.Y. training

The point made by Neil Fisk (The Indexer 16 (3) April 89, 208) could be prepared by indexers experienced in different fields, as being recommended for use in the same way as he suggests for Indexing, the art of.

Even indexers who have taken the formal courses are on their own in attaining competence, so all further suggestions for D.I.Y. training would be useful.

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Stockport

Coming events


16 Nov. 1989: Society of Indexers’ meeting. Three experienced indexers with widely different methods will describe recent work; one completely manual, one using computer, one space-age systems. 6-8 pm, The Library Association, 7 Ridgmount St, London WC1.

19 Nov. 1989: ‘Information industry overview’. NFAIS. Columbus, Ohio. Info: NFAIS, 1429 Walnut Street, Philadelphia. PA 19102, USA.


6-8 April 1990: Society of Indexers’ Conference, Pollock Halls of Residence, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Info: Kate Chapman, Moghbrae, St Ronan’s Terrace, Innerleithen, Tweeddale, Scotland EH44 6RD.


‘From Pepys via Jennifer to Adrian Mole, diarists have found ready and devoted readers. Diaries are for browsing in, skimming through; checking out in the index the compiler’s likes and dislikes, friendships and enmities.’

—from a review by Robin Denniston of Out of the wilderness: diaries 1963-67, by Tony Benn; in Church Times, 27 Nov 1987