Indexing policy

The title of this paper carefully limited itself to 'questions', but the reader who has persevered thus far deserves at least a few of the answers that are incorporated in procedures at the Imperial War Museum. The first of these is that, on the whole, the Museum does not really follow a policy of indexing the collections. Rather, we catalogue the collections and then index the catalogues. The researcher then finds—or may hope to find—the supplementary information in the collections. Rather, we catalogue the collections and then index the catalogues. The researcher then finds—or may hope to find—the supplementary information in the catalogues that explain some of the issues of relevance or acceptability explored above. The catalogue is not intended to be a substitute for viewing the collection, but is intended to serve as a filter so that unnecessary viewing (which can be disruptive and time-consuming for all concerned) is kept to a minimum.

Within this general principle, issues of political sensitivity are addressed by following, as far as practicable, whatever position was broadly accepted by the international community at the period to which the material relates (so that, for example, we locate Alsace in Germany from 1871–1918 and in France thereafter). Issues of morality are as far as possible avoided by using neutral vocabularies—for example, the description of any overt political statement designed to incite fear, hatred or ridicule of a perceived enemy as 'propaganda, inflammatory' regardless of its source or target.

Other goals which the Museum has set itself—though not, to be honest, as yet quite attained—are coherent procedures across all seven collections and a strong level of Museum-wide terminology control. The procedures outlined are evolving, not evolved—comments and opinions from outside experts are always welcome.

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First find your index

T. E. Lawrence, author of the classic Seven pillars of wisdom, a complex, detailed account of the Arab Revolt of 1916–18, cared greatly about typography and design—so much so as to tailor his text for the sake of appearance. He did not merely eschew widows and orphans, but actually revised his text after seeing proofs so that each paragraph should end in the second half of the line—earlier would have been aesthetically displeasing; and rewrote also to adjust page breaks and openings for typographic elegance. He told a correspondent, 'Often we have to alter things, to dress the ends of the paragraphs neatly. Also I don't wish any words divided at the ends of lines. These things all lead to rearrangement'. He 'added a few words to the concluding paragraph' of pages to make the last line solid. We know of journalists measuring their words by the hundred, but for literature such as Seven pillars to come second to design considerations in the estimation of its author seems strange indeed.

Lawrence originally intended to index the work himself, but abandoned this plan in favour of synopses at the beginning of the book, and, for each page, its own contents summary in small caps above the text. 'MORALITY OF BATTLE—STRAVENESS AND PAIN—DETACHMENT—ARABIA PROPER—THE PROBLEM OF POPULATION—NOMADISM IN ACTION—TIDES OF WANDERING'—one per page except for chapter openings (122 untitled chapters) and illustrations. All were devised by Lawrence, one criterion being that facing pairs should be of equal length for symmetrical effect.

A subscription edition of a hundred-odd copies, privately and very expensively printed in accordance with all these principles, was produced in 1926. Lawrence died on 19 May 1935, aged 44, after a road accident; Jonathan Cape rushed out a general, workaday edition of the book, abandoning the fine typographical precepts, published 30 June that year. Presses ran night and day, and the text was indexed as it was set, resulting in a most inadequate piece of work.

For 684 pages of text (in the current Penguin edition), plus appendices, there are two indexes: a little over four pages of place names, and over five for the 'Personal index'. Neither has any subheadings; many names lack completion or any explanation—'Joyce', entered simply thus, is not in fact a lady of the desert, but should be cited, 'Joyce, Lt.-Col. Pierce Charles'. This entry has six lines of undifferentiated page references; Nasir of Medina, Sherif, has eleven; and Feisal, Emir, fifteen. In the index to place names, Damascus and Deraa each have six such lines, and Akaba seven.

We may all nod and recognize such a result from indexing in such circumstances. What seems incredible is that the frantic endeavours of June 1935 have never been revised in any of the enormous numbers of reprints of this volume. The Penguin edition, first published 1962 and reprinted almost annually since then, each time repeats the indexes from Cape's 1935 edition. So efficiency of information retrieval, after all, remains second to the look of the thing; barely basic indexes at the back of the book contrast with detailed subject analysis of the text still found atop each page. What subject headings and subheadings are here, had they but been assembled and properly arranged in the index!

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