

Indexing biographies: the main character

Some contrasting examples of the treatment of the main character of a biography in its index (other than by omission *tout court*) have come to our attention since the subject was considered in *The Indexer* 16 (3) April 1989, 168–72.

By far the simplest method is to leave the subentries in the order of occurrence in the text, unedited. As this is likely to coincide with the chronological development of the narrative, the practice may be defended; but carried to extremes it attracts severe censure. *John Henry Newman* by Ian Ker (Clarendon Press, 1988) has 762 pages, ten of which are devoted to the entry for the main subject in the index. Bernard Levin complains most bitterly of this (as detailed elsewhere in this issue under ‘Thundering about indexing’): ‘The hundreds of references are not in alphabetical order at all, but only in the order in which they appear in the book’; and Dr Roderick Strange likewise insists, in reviewing that same biography in the *Sunday Times*, ‘When it is reprinted, its 20 columns of subtitles [*sic*] in the index under Newman must be rearranged alphabetically and not left unhelpfully in order of appearance in the text’.

This desired alphabetical rearrangement of the subheadings for the main character is offered in the index to *Lady Charlotte* (by Revel Guest and Angela John; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), which indeed is commended in a review in *The Tablet* for ‘the excellence of its index . . . a model deserving of attention by all prospective biographers’. (Nevertheless, its indexer, Christine Shuttleworth, receives neither credit at the head of the index nor an acknowledgement among the one and a half pages of these.) The book makes 320 pages; the index takes 19.

Its prefatory note explains:

In this index LC stands for Lady Charlotte; JG for her first husband, John Guest; CS for her second husband, Charles Schreiber.

Under

Schreiber, Lady Charlotte Elizabeth (*née* Bertie) (1812–95) . . .

a column and a half of subheadings are arranged strictly alphabetically, in run-on layout. Most have two to four page-references each, the maximum being nine. To quote sequences (omitting page references):

acts as JG’s secretary; and architecture; badge collection; biography, interest in; birth; Buckner’s portrait of; . . . compiles catalogue of playing cards; and CS; death; dislike of dancing; early relationship with CS; early years; education, interest in; etchings; failing eyesight; fan collection; feelings about marriage;

. . . marriage to CS; marriage to CS disapproved of; marriage to JG; . . . needlework, interest in; obituaries of; orientalia, interest in; . . . visits Dowlais for last time; Watts’s portrait of.

Clearly, there is no chronology nor logical grouping, but simply alphabetical order. On the evidence of the three reviewers cited above, this is the arrangement general readers prefer—uncomplicated and easily understood; references may be quickly located provided that you know what it is you are seeking, and what will be the first word of the term used.

The third method is to introduce logical grouping by dint of much editing.

An interesting and complex example of full treatment of the main character is found in the index to *Berlioz: volume one: the making of an artist* by David Cairns (Deutsch, 1989). The index, of 21 pages for 563 pages of text and appendages, has its own preliminary half-title page, reading ‘Index by Professor G. D. West [in bold]: Note: “Paris” is omitted from the Index. HB = Hector Berlioz’. Professor West, however, is not mentioned in the book’s three pages of acknowledgments—the usual fate of indexers.

The entry for ‘Berlioz, Hector, (HB)’ takes nearly four and a half pages. It is set run-on, divided into paragraphs, each with its own heading in italics with capital initial, and with its own set of subheadings where appropriate—some have but a single entry. We will list these headings, occasionally noting in brackets what comes under them:

America, Asia, and the South Seas, HB’s lifelong passion for; Anatomy, HB’s early interest in (one page-reference only); *Ancestry* (19–21); *Appearance; Birth* (one page-ref.); *Branchu, Mme, influence on HB; Character* (subheadings alphabetically arranged after the first entry, ‘recollections’); *Childhood* (‘nothing known up to age of 12 years’—one page-ref.); *Composers influenced by HB* (alphabetically arranged); *Early instruction in music; Education; Father, HB’s relationship with* (18-line entry with chronological arrangement of subheadings); *Ill-health; Influences on HB—literature* (43 lines); *Influences on HB—music* (36 lines); *Instruments, HB’s knowledge of and ability to play; Journalism; Law, HB refuses to study instead of medicine* (two references); *Lorrain, Claude, influence on HB* (two references); *Love Life* (this paragraph employs the only bold type in the index, for the names of five ladies, in alphabetical order, each with her array of sub-subheadings); *Marmion, Félix, influence on HB; Medicine, study of; Mendelssohn and HB; Mother, HB’s relationship with; Napoleon I, influence on HB; Natural world and science, HB’s early interest in;*

Nature, influence on HB (one reference); *Physics, HB's interest in*; *Portraits of HB* (one ref.); *Prix de Rome*; *Religion*; *Rossini and HB*; *Saint-Simonism, HB's interest in*; *Sisters, HB's relationship with*; *Théâtre des Nouveautés*; *Works by HB—literature*; *Works by HB—music, complete, fragmentary, and not extant* (nearly three columns).

The paragraph division is not on the principle of equal division of references, but of giving prominence to important subheadings even when these have only one reference, such as *Ancestry* and *Birth*. Paragraph division for subheads, followed under *Love Life* by bold type for sub-heads, makes possible the use, without confusion, of sub-sub-heads in run-on. Each of the five ladies also has her own separate entry, as do Mme Branchu, Claude Lorrain, and the members of Berlioz's family—although, curiously, the subdivisions are less detailed and explicit in the main entries than in the subentries under Hector Berlioz. Compare, for instance:

Berlioz, Hector . . .

Sisters, HB's relationship with, 51, 420; develops close rapport with Nancy, 272, 312; loses rapport with Nancy 495–7, 498–9; becomes closer to Adèle, who 'loved him without conditions' 495–7

with:

Berlioz, Adèle, sister of HB, [4 lines of undifferentiated page numbers]; quoted 100 n, 370

and:

Berlioz, Nancy (Anne-Marguerite) sister of HB correspondent and diarist [10 lines of undifferentiated page numbers]; birth 42; character 92; marriage to Camille Pal 477–8 & n; quoted [4 lines of page numbers]

Berlioz's works are collated under his main entry, and not also listed separately in the index.

Altogether, an original and ingenious index, whose author clearly knows just where he wishes his emphasis placed, and which must result from close study and analysis of the text.

*

Reviewing Chris Williams' biography of Christina Stead in *The Times* (27 January 1990), Julia Briggs wrote of 'the first problem of the biographer, whether to follow a strict chronology or to pursue particular themes'. It is a problem keenly exercising the indexers of biographies, too.

So for arrangement of entries under the main character of a biography, the choice remains—order of occurrence/chronological; alphabetical; or edited by topic? Each method has its advantages and its adherents.

H.K.B.

Passages above quoted by permission of Messrs André Deutsch.

Catching the tenor

Great operatic disasters by Hugh Vickers (Macmillan, 1979) has one of those indexes that serve as an inviting sample of the text. The book is as funny as the following index headings suggest:

Animals, aggressive
 impervious to artistry
 incontinent
 over-affectionate
 recycled
 unexpected behaviour of
 B.B.C., unexpected good fortune of listeners to
 Boats, dangerous to tenors
 prematurely scuttled
 Brunnhilde, temporarily blinded by helmet
 Carmen, unkindness to animals
 Curtain, unpredictable behaviour of
 Donkey, antic behaviour of during earthquake
 Dragons, Wagnerian, flashing
 Horses, centrifuged
 Hump, Rigoletto's, displaced
 Husband, providential loss of
 Kettle-drums, landing-strip for horse
 Lingerie, escaped
 Lions, dislike of high notes
 Moustache, Duke of Mantua's, swallowed
 Mussolini, weighed against Toscanini and found wanting
 Pigeon droppings, simulated
 Singing positions, inverted
 suspended
 underwater
 Stagehands, congenitally ham-fisted
 intransigent
 malevolent
 unbalanced
 Swan, dangerous to tenors
 Tosca, bouncing
 foiled by science
 shot by mistake
 Yugoslav tenor, need for large horse
 Zebras, in attempt to enliven *Norma*

The book's sequel, *Even greater operatic disasters* (Macmillan, 1982) includes in its index the following high notes:

Amneris, almost filleted
 Beard, flaming
 Chorus, intransigence of
 Horse, music loving
 Wagner-hating
 Seal, enthusiasm of
 Valkyries, definitely not antelopes
 Zoos, unwise neighbours for opera houses

Extracts above reprinted by kind permission of Macmillan Publishers.