Thundering about indexing

How pleasant to know Mr Levin. And to read his witty, penetrating articles, and to have him as a champion.

The Times of 10 November 1989 carried a quarter-page article with major heading, ‘Don’t come to me for a reference’, large cartoon showing labelled ‘Index’ finger severely pointing the way of disgrace to a humble book-carrying scholar, and three-line subheading, ‘Bernard Levin finds Cardinal Newman lost without trace in the index of his latest biography’. As for the text—we may sink back to read it, engulfed in waves of pure pleasure. ‘Indexing is a highly skilled science... There is a highly professional body, the Society of Indexers... If you wish to be sure that your book is in properly expert hands, you must go to the custodian of the Register... the noble and meaningful heading “Index”... Ah...!’

The occasion for these encomia? Mr Levin is distressed—nay, shocked—nay, traumatized—by the ‘full, almost heroic, awfulness’ of the index to Ian Ker’s biography of John Henry Newman—a book whose text he acclaims as wholly admirable. He details his criticism of the index—paragraphs of undifferentiated page numbers, subheadings ‘as ridiculous as they are otiose... listed only in the order in which they appear in the book’. His gravest censure, however, is reserved for the person at Oxford University Press, publisher of this work, who passed the index for press. In a final glorious paragraph, he writes:

Well, I want that somebody’s blood—all of it—delivered to me in a clean jug, with a paint brush, thus enabling me to inscribe right across the façade of the OUP’s main building: ‘This firm was once taken seriously, and deserved to be.’ And I also want the sum of £500 to be given by the OUP to the Society of Indexers, to be wholly devoted to the relief of indexers who have fallen on hard times, particularly those whose misfortune was caused by working for the OUP.

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Four letters appeared in the correspondence columns of The Times commenting upon this article and its issues (from others we know of that were sent but not printed). John Gordon, former Secretary, Chairman and Vice-President of SI, detailed the history and achievements of the Society. ‘An avid reader of books on history’ wrote that he found many of these now published with ‘indexes (so-called) which are quite useless to me as a consumer-reader’; and the Marquess of Anglesey suggested that, while authors may well learn to index their own books competently, there is a need for professional indexers to relieve authors of the ‘great deal of time, trouble, and space’ necessary, so that they may instead ‘get on with their next book’. And one from the Chairman of The Institute for Social Inventions. He claimed: ‘To meet a Christmas printing deadline, I had one hour, between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m., to create the index of over 1,200 entries for our 250,000-word Encyclopaedia of Social Inventions and to typeset and lay out this index’. He found it, he tells us, ‘simplicity itself—one keystroke on the computer and our off-the-shelf software whizzed through the text picking out the headings I had previously marked [not within the “one hour”?] and putting them in alphabetical order, with page numbers’.

Trembling, we awaited this index that should fore-shadow our doom. The book appeared in January 1990, at £14.95 from the Institute for Social Inventions, London. The ‘index’ consists of entries under inventors (surnames only), corporate names and titles of inventions. For example, ‘Bringing hobbies into the school curriculum’ is indexed under ‘Bringing’ but not under ‘hobbies’, ‘curricula’, ‘national curriculum’ or ‘schools’. ‘Two Sir Humphreys’, a proposal to reform the Civil Service by a system of ‘alternate heads’ is indexed under ‘Two’ but not under ‘civil service’ or ‘alternate heads’.

This seems to prove once again that blind reliance upon computers can produce only a travesty of an index, while correct choice and form of entry, and proper subject indexing, require full human intelligence and skill—as Bernard Levin was saying so eloquently when we came in.

‘Little cockney intellect...’—are we all?

T. E. Hulme, philosopher and Imagist poet, in an article defending the sculptor Jacob Epstein against his critics, took a sideswipe at one of them who had written a book on Nietzsche. It hadn’t much to do with his theme, but provided the opportunity for a gratuitous sneer at those for whom accuracy of detail matters. Whether he was right to imply that such a concern is incompatible with wider views or deeper levels of understanding must be left for readers of this journal to determine. Hulme’s words are:

What, very briefly then, is the particular type of charlatan revealed in this book on Nietzsche? It gave one the impression of a little Cockney intellect which would have been more suitably employed indexing or in a lawyer’s office, drawn by a various kind of vanity into a region the realities of which must for ever remain incomprehensible to him.

(Quoted in Epstein: an autobiography, p. 64, from an article ‘Mr. Epstein and the Critics’ by T. E. Hulme, in The New Age, December 25th, 1913).

J.A.V.