Indexes, mentions of, by reviewers

The editorial in the October 1989 Indexer suggests that Norman Hillier’s regular compilation of extracts ‘reveals how high and wide-spread is the degree of concern with indexes …’ (etc). Well, that’s how it might look if you are only counting up what is sent in. What really counts, surely, is the number of reviewers who ignore the whole indexing business. I think the best count I ever achieved in going through wodges of reviews in individual journals was one in six reviewers giving any mention of the index. I have just done another trawl through a journal (Archaeological Journal, as it happens, but I am sure it is typical) and achieved the following count:

- Number of pages of reviews—70 (they do it in a big way, for the good of their libraries I expect)
- Number of books reviewed—66
- Number of index mentions—8

That’s just under one book in eight achieving an index mention. I really don’t think that is a particularly bright outlook for us! And these are nearly all academic-level books where you might expect that look-up was one of the prime requisites.

(Incidentally, one of the reviewers was alert enough to see that the indexer was actually making a potential contribution to the discipline by bringing scattered bits together to suggest something more powerful. That’s what we hope we are doing much of the time, but that was a rare reviewer Nonetheless!)

Cherry Lavell
London NW1

Indexes to works of fiction

In his article on the need for indexes to works of fiction (The Indexer 16 (4) Oct. 1989, 239-48), Philip Bradley refers to the belief held by some that an index may be ‘positively detrimental to the aims of fiction as an imaginative, creative genre’ (ibid, 240). This belief, it seems to me, is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of fiction, or of the difference between fiction and fact.

If I am reading a book and find that I cannot remember whether John Smith is Peter Smith’s uncle or his grandfather, then it does not matter in the slightest whether I am reading a novel or a biography. My need of factual information is exactly the same in both cases. The facts in a work of fiction may have no independent existence outside it, whereas those in a work of non-fiction do exist independently of the book, but that is irrelevant. Within the context of the book, which is all an index is concerned with, the one kind of fact is every bit as factual, and as indexable, as the other.

Some of Mr Bradley’s correspondents concede (ibid, 241) that the characters in a long novel may usefully be listed, but that does not take us very far. Suppose I know very well who John Smith is, but cannot recall whether he was present at A’s dinner party, when X became apparent to Y and Z. That is a question of fact, one of a great many facts that I may need to be clear about if I am to appreciate the author’s literary genius.

In other words, a ‘creative genre’ such as novel-writing is not one that enables its practitioners to feel themselves superior to mere facts. Their books are full of facts, which they themselves have supplied.

In similar vein, Jeanette Winterson (ibid, 241) objects to indexes to novels on the grounds that ‘We need what magic remains in this little life’, but that is to miss the point. The reader is welcome to ignore the index while having his magical experience, but it may enable him to have the experience again later. If the ‘magic’ arises from the effect of the book as a whole, or from the reader’s enjoyment of a carefree afternoon spent in a private dream-world, then no index is needed, but not all magic is of those kinds. While agreeing with one of Mr Bradley’s academic correspondents (ibid, 242) that a novel should be considered as a whole, one may still legitimately wish to refer to or re-read parts of it, for magical or other reasons.

Mr Bradley alludes more than once to the possibility that ‘factual’ information, e.g. in historical novels, may be indexable, and cites (ibid, 245) the author of a jacket blurb to that effect. Again this misses the point, which is that within the context of a book, i.e. within the purview of its index, all facts are equally factual, regardless of whether they also enjoy a different kind of factuality beyond the book’s covers. In other words, book indexes index books, not real life.

An example may not be out of place. Some years ago I was asked to index a novel, an annotated edition of Jerome K. Jerome’s Three men in a boat (Pavilion Books and Michael Joseph, 1982; the original text first published 1889). This masterpiece of escapist literature is full of references to ‘real’ people and places (which casts an interesting light on Jeanette Winterson’s belief (ibid, 241) that the purpose of fiction is ‘to take us to another world’), and no doubt the annotations by Christopher Matthew and Benny Green were an additional reason for the publishers’ decision to include an index.
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

My index distinguishes typographically between references to the annotations and references to the original text, but includes both impartially. Nor does it distinguish between 'real' facts mentioned by Jerome, such as King John's acceptance of Magna Carta at Runnymede, and 'imaginary' facts such as the difficulty experienced by the three men in trying to open a tin without a tin-opener. In the context of the book, Magna Carta and the tin-opener are equally factual and equally worthy of being indexed.

Mr Bradley's correspondents may be right in being generally agreed that there is little call for indexes to modern novels, but books that have become the subject of serious study are a different matter altogether. The need for indexed editions of Tom Jones and Vanity Fair, and for indexed sets of Hardy, Trollope, Dickens and others, seems to me to be very nearly self-evident, a need that could be denied only on the grounds of cost.

I wonder, though, whether those publishers who from time to time bring out scholarly editions of classic novels, complete with learned introductions and extensive end-notes but without indexes, may have been influenced only partly by the cost factor and partly by a mistaken idea as to the nature of facts in fiction and their susceptibility to indexing. One can only hope that such blindness, if it does occur, will one day respond to treatment.

Anthony Raven
West Wickham, Kent

The second index is an alphabetical checklist of stories mentioned in the narrative: The Swedish Diplomat's Tale, The Tale of Four Young Folk stuck in the Lift, etc. It comprises 3 pages, or 0.6% of the total length. References in this index are to chapter number rather than page.

For a novel such as this, which is in the encyclopaedic tradition and overflows with names, characters, histories, stories, and dates, the indexes are an invaluable addition.

Garry Cousins
Sydney, Australia

In his well-researched article on indexing fiction (The Indexer 16 (4) October 1989, 239-48) Philip Bradley mentions that some of the best fiction indexes he has found are those to French works. After reading the index to George Perec's La Vie mode d'emploi, I would have to agree.

This 500-page book, translated by David Bellos in 1987 as Life: a user's manual, and published in Great Britain by Collins Harvill, actually has two indexes: a general name and subject index, and an index to stories mentioned in the text.

The general index consists of 58 pages, or 11.6% of the total length. As its length suggests, it is very comprehensive. Not only are general subjects included, but also operas, songs and books cited in the text; characters mentioned in books cited are also indexed. There is even an entry for Saint-Nectaire, a type of cheese! The entry for PARIS is particularly exhaustive. It is subdivided into 19 subsections: arrondissements, avenues, bridges, buildings, boulevards, churches, etc. However, the general heading of PARIS contains 65 unsubdivided references, which is not very helpful.

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Index, how not to: a postscript

Following my article in The Indexer 15 (3) April 1987, pp 163-6, my conscience insisted that words needed to be matched by actions. Deploiring and exposing an incompetent index is one thing; setting it to rights is another. The index to Conflict and reconciliation was clearly beyond any mending. So I set about reindexing the book, to make its contents more accessible both to myself and other readers and users. Using Cindex and WordPerfect, this has resulted in a 16-page A5 booklet which I can now reproduce by photocopier and make available on demand at a charge of 50p to cover essential costs and postage. The author gave his full backing and approval, and was grateful for my 'rescue operation'.

This prompts the thought that it would further our campaign for higher standards of indexing in the publishing world if we were to undertake more rescue operations of this kind. True, some books do not deserve a good index; i.e., it is doubtful if they deserved to be published in the first place. But there are enough that both deserve and need indexes to keep us busy for the foreseeable future. The Society might give its official blessing to the efforts of individual members by publishing a list of reindexes ('ana-indexes') available and even perhaps acting as a middleman through whom copies might be obtained.

John A. Vickers
Bognor Regis

The names of the lords

I was pleased to see Mr Bowron's letter in The Indexer 16 (4), 279, in which he raised the question of indexing members of the aristocracy, who have these disconcerting habits of changing their names and status from time to time, and possessing far too many names. There is no easy answer to his questions of practice, for despite the rigid rules which used to be provided for library cataloguers, many individuals deserve individual [special?]
treatment. One remembers the American cry (in reality it’s not only Americans who make errors in this sphere): ‘What is this damned fellow Shaftesbury interfering in social reform for? Why doesn’t he leave it to Lord Ashley, who was doing this long before he came on the scene?’ I needn’t spell out why there seemed to be two characters on the job.

In fact, in addition to the two problems in all this, the change of names and the variety of names which aristocrats legitimately and simultaneously hold, such as variant titles, and surnames (often double-barrelled or more), there are the awful errors which writers and indexers do make. And of course, it’s not made any easier for us in that the rules have somewhat changed, with life peers and all that.

But I musn’t go on. Madame editor, would you like an article on this, from merely one of Mother Nature’s aristocrats? Mr Bowron is right in wanting to avoid hyper-pedantry, and I am sure we should avoid inaccuracy, but there must be a middle way.

J. D. Lee
Harrow, Mddx.

Yes, Sir.—Ed.

Free copies for indexers

Claire Andrews, in her highly informative ‘A publisher’s view of indexers and indexing’ (The Indexer 16(3) April 1989, (189–91), states that her firm is ‘unfortunately unable to give free copies of books worked on to indexers . . . since we need to limit carefully the number of free copies of a title to make sure we can price that book at a level its readers can afford’. This is, I fear, a penny-wise and pound-foolish attitude all too common in the publishing trades on both sides of the Atlantic. I am happy to report some progress in re-educating the American publishers with whom I have worked, and suggest that my British colleagues take heart and do likewise.

I always make it clear to my publishers that the option of obtaining a copy of any book in which my work appears is both a moral right of authorship (with which they are already familiar) and a condition of the contractual arrangement under which I write (whether I am writing a book, a magazine article, or an index). I point out that I may not always exercise that option—some books one is asked to index are simply not worth shelf space—and remind them that I do not charge extra for the express mail which is my usual way of submitting completed index mss.

Both concessions tend to disarm the argument that the publisher can’t afford to release a copy of the book, and steer the discussion away from the fallacy that such a copy is ‘free’. It has, in fact, been paid for, and amply so: indexers are often responsible for the only clear taxonomy to be found in a book full of information which in the author’s presentation may be quite inchoate—to say nothing of the errors we catch which have slipped by several editors (whose right to ‘free’ copies is standard in the American book trades), or of the verbal hand-holding which mercy compels us to do for the first-time author anxious about all aspects of the book (and the tenured teaching position to which its publication may be a prerequisite).

Money for value

SI Council member Cherry Lavell has some fighting words in British Archaeological News 4 (6), Nov. 1989:

An indexer well known to us reports that he was recently asked by one of the main archaeological publishers to compile an index to a heavy, scholarly monograph, within a week, for £70. Quite rightly, the indexer declined the task at this insulting figure (£200 would have been nearer the mark). We wait now to see whether the book (whose title we will not divulge) will emerge with a wretched index or none at all. What kind of a contribution can such a work make to knowledge?

It is true that the costs of indexing used to bear hard on authors, who were expected to provide (or pay for) the index themselves. But the new standard contract of the Society of Authors requires only half of the indexing costs to be borne by the author, the publisher paying the other half. So the old excuse that the index had to be cheap to save the poor author’s pennies now looks even thinner, and it will be harder for publishers to wriggle out of their obligations to the reader.

The policy of the Council for British Archaeology is to provide indexes to all its scholarly publications, paying indexers the proper rate for the job. It adds very little to the unit cost of the work, but makes all the difference to scholarship. Publishers, wake up!