Authors as their own indexers

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The text of a talk given to the Society of Indexers in March 1990, with the inclusion of comments from the audience. Examines how and why indexes made by authors to their own books may differ from those made by professional indexers.

Authors as indexers

It was only after I had agreed to speak on the subject of authors as their own indexers that I realized I knew very little about it. However, I assumed that I should have no difficulty in finding books indexed by their authors, since I knew that a number of Wheatley medallists had indexed books they had themselves produced. As I shall explain later, that proved an inadequate source. Other books that I looked at, although in many cases not accrediting the index to any named person, might, or might not, have been indexed by their authors. I ended by examining a very small sample. My object was to see where, if at all, indexes made by authors differed from indexes made by professional indexers. I have drawn a few tentative conclusions, but they cannot be regarded as valid generalizations.

Authors' prejudices

Having just completed and indexed a book of my own, there at least was one subject to hand, I thought, only to be confronted by the problem: was I an author who had indexed her own book, or an indexer who had written a book? My hybrid state makes it difficult to know when I am prompted by an author's prejudices and when by an indexer's training. I retain, however, one conviction that only an author could be moved by: having seen how hasty copy-editors and proof-readers can make nonsense of a text, I am not going to let anyone else make nonsense of the index to my book. That conviction, and, of course, the knowledge that one's own creation is valuable and unique, is the strongest motive authors have for making their own indexes.

(At this point in my talk; members of the audience demurred. They were convinced that the author's chief motive for doing a DIY job was unwillingness to pay an indexer. They cited instances where they themselves had been called in by publishers to make good an author's botched job.)

Reverting to my own indexing, that was certainly influenced by my view, as the originator, of the relative importance of different parts of the text. Since my books were to some extent didactic, I knew that certain concepts needed to be indexed with particular care, so that students should have their attention drawn to particular passages in the text. Sometimes I used additional entries, sometimes I made a sub-entry especially for such a subject. For instance, my publisher's editor, with an eye for sales in America, had pointed out that though I had contrasted the British Museum's practice in entering pseudonymous works with that of the Anglo-American code, I had made no parallel reference to the Library of Congress. Now the Library of Congress's practice in making author headings has been that of the American Library Association ever since publication of the first Anglo-American code of 1908. If the publisher's editor, who had herself been a librarian, did not know that, then others also must be ignorant of it. So somewhere in the text I managed to insert a parenthesis, for which I made the index entry

Library of Congress: rules for author and title entry

ensuring that the information could be found if sought, and brought to a reader's attention if unsuspected. I could not have been certain that another indexer would have considered a twenty-word parenthesis worth indexing. There were many other instances of concepts in the text that I hoped to emphasize additionally through the index. I thus made the index complementary to the text in a more intimate way than I suspect would have been the case had there been no bond of parenthood between indexer and book. (Here members of the audience pointed out that bias in the creator's point of view could result in simply reproducing the arrangement of the book, as, for example, making four main section headings with a multitude of subheadings instead of offering the specific and alternative approaches that the dispassionate indexer seeks to provide.)

Indexers unknown

Turning to other authors' indexes, I was lucky enough to have the help of a non-indexer friend who had recently published a book that he had indexed himself. The book was about the author's wartime experiences as sergeant in charge of security in General Montgomery's headquarters from D-Day until 1945. The author agreed to let me ask him questions about his index and use his answers in this talk. The book had 194 pages of text, and 6 pages of index.
First I asked why he had decided to make an index. The author said that as the book was brief (fewer than 200 pages) and in narrative form, he had supposed an index to be unnecessary. However, his publishers (to their credit) decided otherwise, and asked whether he would prefer to index it himself or to let them find an indexer. I was somewhat shaken when he went on to confess that until that moment he had not realized there was a verb ‘to index’ nor a noun ‘indexer’. I suppose, if he considered the matter at all, he assumed that the author just ‘did the index’.

Now I should tell you that this was a highly intelligent man. He had been responsible for safeguarding the Commander-in-Chief and his headquarters all the way from Normandy to the Rhine. All his life he had used books. Obviously he was of ripe years, since the war was a long time ago. At the time of his retirement he held a post as head of his department in the Faculty of Education in a college of the University of London. But, he was unaware that indexers existed!

Whether his publishers would have made use of Indexers available I do not know. My author, having had dealings chiefly with a staff of young women who he suspected would know nothing of the war, and being of self-reliant temperament, said he would make the index himself. Not having previously been aware that indexing was a professional activity, he did not think to seek any written guidance on its procedures.

The peripatetic system

His method of work will amuse you advanced technologists. He took twenty-six large sheets of paper, each headed with a letter of the alphabet, and, having removed most of the furniture from his study, he spread them clockwise in alphabetical sequence round the floor.

Then, sitting at the centre of his paper circle, he read, and reread, his book to choose the terms that should go into his index. In choosing terms he was thinking chiefly of potential readers who would be looking for names of persons and places they had known during the war, possibly on their own uncomfortable trek across northern Europe in pursuit of the German army.

He wrote each chosen term on the sheet bearing its initial letter, trying to keep the entries in alphabetical order. This might be termed the peripatetic system of indexing, since it entailed a walk to the appropriate sheet for the insertion of every entry and page reference. Thus every time he came to a mention of Montgomery he returned to the ‘M’ sheet and added another page number. As he proceeded, it became necessary to use additional large sheets, and he sighed, he said, for the use of the Albert Hall! When he had reached the end of the book he gathered up his sheaves of papers, adjusted the alphabetization and typed the index on to sheets of normal size.

When I asked whether he had followed any principles in the choice and form of index entries, he said that he had taken significant terms from the text and had used them as they occurred on the page, singular or plural, noun or adjective, as found. All page references to a single entry followed each other in the numerical sequence of the pages.

What chiefly marred this usable but unprofessional index was the number of undifferentiated page references that followed many of the entry words. Montgomery, for example, had 31 page references. I supposed that having been a patient user of indexes with similar strings of page numbers, the author had not thought it odd, or unhelpful, to make such entries himself, but he immediately conceded that the use of subheadings such as ‘character’, ‘living quarters’, ‘accepts German surrender’, would have made the index more informative and quicker to use.

Incidentally, as I pondered, myself, on strings of references under terms such as ‘occupation’ (11 page references) and ‘liberation’ (16 references), I wondered how helpful subheadings would have been there, whether they would not have suggested localized events rather than states of existence, the sense in which the author had used them. Perhaps specific entries should additionally have been made under the place names, as Brussels: liberation Caen: liberation and so on.

That the author should look elsewhere than in his text, or his own knowledge, for forms of name did not occur to him. Montgomery is entered with his forenames, Keitel with his title, Jodl merely under surname. This did not seem to me to matter in the least, there being no possibility of confusion. Place names, on the other hand, I thought should have been identified. In the index I found St Lo, 59, followed by St Nicholas, 100. Turning to the page reference, I discovered that St Lo was a village in Normandy, St Nicholas a Christmas celebration. The single-word entry ‘Czech’ also puzzled me. The first two page-references concerned a particular Czech national, the third Czech prisoners in prisoner-of-war camps.

One outside reference source had been consulted: the telephone directory had been consulted for the alphabetical placing of initialisms and of the abbreviation for ‘saint’.

There was no apparatus of cross-references, but that hardly mattered since many topics had been entered under both specific and generic terms.

I think you will agree that although this wheel is somewhat rough-hewn, it runs.
Scholarship applied

Then I looked at another contemporary author's index, made by the author himself because, on his own admission, he did not trust anyone else to do it properly. This time it was a history professor's book, about Elizabethan England. The book had 351 pages of text, and 16 double-column pages of index.

It seemed to me that most of the subjects written about had been included in the index. The author was obviously assuming a readership capable of understanding his text and familiar with its terminology. An outside indexer would doubtless have made more references between both synonyms and related terms not found in the text. For example, there is an entry for Theatres, with the names of individual theatres subsumed, but no references from Playhouses or Entertainment. There is an entry for Renaissance, English, covering a fairly large span of pages, and also for Drama, and for Plays.

Being used to checking his references, this author had taken care to identify persons in his index, giving them full names, as Cecil, William, 1st Baron Burghley and where necessary referring from alternative names, as Salisbury, Earl of see Cecil, Robert.

Occasionally a word from the text has been indexed without subheads but with several page references. For example 'dissent' has four page references, the first referring, rather surprisingly, to the author's own dissent from received historiographic tradition on a certain point, the second to lack of channels for dissent, the third to people's rights of dissent, the fourth to the possible consequences of dissent; then follow two subheads for political and religious dissent.

More disconcerting were long strings of page references under such names as Cecil, William and Elizabeth I. After the string of page numbers come some subheadings: under Cecil, for example, 'ecclesiastical policy', 'gifts to', 'patronage' and 'wardship'. This was not carelessness on the author's part. I discovered upon looking up the undifferentiated page references that they were mere mentions, e.g., one under Elizabeth I was to the effect that now that Elizabeth was dead, someone had felt it safe to criticize Henry VIII. A trained indexer would doubtless have used an introductory note to explain this procedure, instead of leaving it to the frustrated reader to discover the indexer's guide-lines after a number of fruitless searches. An indexer might alternatively have indicated 'mentions' and gathered them together at the end of such an entry.

But, altogether, an appropriate, scholarly, and usable index.

Wheatley winners

I wondered how those two indexes compared with author-made indexes that had won the Wheatley Medal.
They are grouped under class headings: Career, Appearance, Character, Opinions and Mentioned briefly. And there, in the index, is Canning’s life in brief: what he did, what he looked like, how he was motivated, how he expressed his thoughts. But should one want to know, for example, about the petition against him sent to the Queen by the inhabitants of Calcutta, one must find the reference half way through three columns of sub-entries devoted to his career. (It does not appear among the entries under Calcutta.)

At this point I turned to Hazel Bell’s article on indexing biographies in The Indexer of April 1989,† to see what a professional indexer thought. Mrs Bell supports entry under the name of the main character, rather than dispersing throughout the index entries relating to him and says, ‘A full content index is helpful to those readers who do not know what to expect to find’ (p. 170), and she adds that ‘a chronological arrangement will coincide roughly with the events of the book, producing a minor narrative, itself, easy to follow’ (p. 169). And that, indeed, is the case in the index to ‘Clemency’ Canning. But if the entry under the main character is very long, pin-pointing a specific topic, even when category headings have been used, can be difficult. It seems to me that double-entry is the only solution.

The same problem occurs, in a lesser degree, under other headings. If one wishes to know about the portrait of Colin Campbell, it is necessary to read through almost a column of sub-headings before coming to ‘Sir F. Grant to paint, 304’.

Mrs Bell also mentions the possibility of using significant variations in typography, and that reminds me, incidentally, of a French work on the Confessions of St Augustine that I once came across.§ There typography does all the work of sub-headings in the general index. Bold type is used for names of persons closely connected with Augustine until his 35th year; small capitals for names of other persons in antiquity; italics for words and expressions with historical, doctrinal or philological interest; and ordinary roman for the rest. So one finds

Ambroise de Milan [and his page reference in bold]
ANNIBAL [in small capitals]
Carthage [in roman]
demons
figuer symbolique
Harris [a modern writer quoted, in roman]

It is ingenious, repulsive to look at, and, surely, not very helpful.

A meandering index

The other Wheatley Medal winner that I looked at was How to catch trout, by J. M. Dickie.† The 178 pages of text were followed by 18 pages of index, just over one tenth of the length of the book. This is the 3rd edition, up-dated, of a book written originally by ‘Three anglers’ in 1888. The present author says in the Preface:

The three anglers presented their practical wisdom clearly, briefly, but highly useable, and without hum-bug, under readily consultable headings. The aim has been to follow so excellent an example and—to help further in ease of consultability—an index has been added.

In search of brief, but highly usable, index entries, I found

Bugbears in dry-fly fishing, 45–6.
Litter: putting of into a water as a byelaw pollution offence in England and Wales, 141, Scotland 170; penalties, 143, 171.
Wading 16–18; use of hands when, 14; action when taking a tumble in, 17–18.
Worm-fishing in streams, 54–67, burns, 66, lochs, 102; rod for, 54; in burns, 66; reel for, 55; reel-line for, 55; cast for, 55; swivel in cast for, 55, 65.

[and so on]. The punctuation is copious and meticu-lous, even to the full stop at the end of each entry.

Most items appear under their own names, as well as in sub-entries, so there is little call for references. One reference, however, caught my eye: ‘Vehicle in offence’ and I duly turned, as bidden, to ‘Boat or vehicle’, under which I found ‘use of, in committing an offence.’

At first, I found all this amusing, then tedious, then plain daft. I do not think that the current Wheatley Medal panel would look twice at so unsophisticated an index, nor one so wasteful of space. Neither, in all probability, would a publisher be willing to devote one-tenth of the length of a book to a closely-printed, run-on index when that book was neither a classic nor a quick-reference work.

Conclusions

The sample of indexes that I looked at is far too small to permit general inferences to be drawn. Hypotheses for further investigation may nevertheless be prompted by what these indexes reveal.

First, why do authors make their own indexes? I think this is for two reasons, the first being that the onus is on them to provide an index, and, even if they are willing to pay for the work, they do not know how to go about getting it done reliably by someone else—they may not even be aware that professional indexers exist. Stanley Unwin states the publisher’s attitude unequivocally:

The preparation of an index is a laborious task, but it is just as much part of some books as a table of contents. If, therefore, one is needed, the author should provide it. Whether it is necessary, the author can be left to decide; if he is wise, he will consult his publisher; if he is not, and he omits an index when one ought to be included, every reviewer will relieve the publisher of the necessity of pointing out the defect.”
The text I have quoted is dated 1947. It no longer reflects a universal attitude among publishers. A recent agreement, the Minimum Terms Agreement, negotiated by the Society of Authors and the Writers' Guild, provides that the cost of indexing, if not done by the author, shall be shared equally between author and publisher. Not all publishers will make such a contract; some will still expect the author to bear the whole cost of the index; a few regard the index as their own responsibility.

Secondly, authors are unwilling to trust anyone else to be sufficiently knowledgeable about their subject and to understand the exact meaning of their text and appreciate its nuances and emphases. Maybe they already have experience of bad indexing. Michael Maclagan says in his Preface that he entitled his book 'Clemency' Canning in an endeavour to make it clear which member of the family was its subject. 'It is not uncommon', he says, 'to find the Prime Minister and his son conflated in the indexes of books not dealing specifically with either of them'.

The author-indexer by definition knows thoroughly what the book is about. He is familiar with its topics and also the context in which he has placed them. In writing the book he has selected a terminology that he considers the most suitable for expressing his assemblage of facts and opinions. He wishes to bring all possible information about the content of the work to the attention of potential readers. His index is likely to become a synopsis of the book itself, to be read by anyone turning to it. The author's bias is bound to be towards his own viewpoint and his own terminology, as my first author used the terms as he found them on the page—Czech for an individual in two references and for a group of prisoners in the third, and the term 'Rhinos' but no reference from 'floating platforms' or 'transport'. A reader may be relatively ignorant of a subject and its terminology—why else should he think of reading the book? He may want to know, not only what is in the book but whether certain topics that he may call by specific or generic names, are to be found there. I think that the author is not always able to put himself in the position of a total stranger to whom the book is an unknown quantity. Unlike the trained indexer, he is probably unaware of aids such as thesauri which would furnish him with synonyms and related terms. Possibly, also, by the time the book's last words have been written and proofs read, making the index is an added chore for which little energy or imagination is left.

Not all authors, of course, are unmindful of possible alternative approaches. There is the famous example of E. C. Bentley, who realized that the approach to even a small item of information might be multifarious and who therefore indexed his brief (four-line verse!) biography of Sir Christopher Wren under 25 different headings—as we were reminded when the Oxford University Press reissued all the 'clerihew' volumes. Rather unusually for an amateur indexer, all Bentley's entries refer to abstract concepts.

Of course, the index made by any particular author reflects the training he has had in his own discipline and also his own personality and experience of life. Both our historians thought chronologically, both were scrupulously exact in presenting names and in distinguishing between separate instances of the same phenomenon—areas where the outside indexer can easily make mistakes. Both authors, in fact, strove to fulfill the requirements of scholarship in accurate statement and citation. One of them, Maclagan, was also a man of affairs—he became Lord Mayor of Oxford in 1970—and possibly that helped him to organize his procedure and announce it at some length at the beginning of his index. There is an individuality about some of his entries that would be foreign to an outsider's, although there is warrant for them in the text—his own text, of course. Here are a few examples:

Hewitt, General: obese and inactive at Meerut, 78–80
Indian Mutiny: stamping out last embers, 232
Telegram, New Yankee word for 'telegraphic despatch', 81
Heralds, College of, 'slowest moving body known', 286

(Maclagan has been Richmond Herald of Arms since 1980, and must have been acquainted with the institution during his earlier research. He clearly relished repeating in the index the quotation given in the text.)

From a different point of view, a teacher may use the index didactically, even to the extent of duplicating or triplicating entries—on the Bellman's principle that 'what I tell you three times is true'.

Our fly-fisher's index reflects unhurried hours of quiet contemplation beside still waters, and so much enthusiasm for his hobby that he rewrites most of his book in the index, quite forgetting that brevity was one of his stated objects. He scatters punctuation like ground bait, using colons to mark off entry words, separating entries from page references with a comma and different sub-entries with a semi-colon, and finishing each entry with a full stop.

The general principles of indexing were enunciated long ago—Wheatley and Sina Spiker, Collison and Martha Wheeler are still classics—and it is perfectly possible for any educated person to think out a system and a methodology for making an index.

Where the author-indexer can be seen to differ from the professional indexer is chiefly in the techniques used. A trained indexer, although basing terminology on the work being indexed, controls its appearance in the index, using singular or plural consistently, converting textual...
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words to nouns or noun phrases, and constructs an armature of references to preserve the shape of the index and to allow a more varied approach than the author-indexer may do. The professional indexer now has many aids at hand. Whereas my friend wondered where to place initialisms and abbreviations, the trained indexer knows which standards to turn to and which other reference books will give speedy answers to questions of classification and nomenclature. He is also more aware of the demand by others for instant information. Researchers are now used to formulating their requests for data in keywords and expecting instant answers, and this is reflected in the presentation of indexes. The professional indexer is also under more constraints than the author, having less time and less space to do the work he has contracted to do, and, of course, he must be ‘from bias free of every kind’. So a formalized rather than a narrative lay-out is often preferred, commas between entry and location reference are dispensed with, and capital letters are used sparingly.

The professional indexer also has mechanical aids at his disposal. Whereas you all have word-processors and MACREX programs, I—I confess with shame—write entries on five-by-three cards, keep them in a shoebox, sort them by hand, rewrite half of them, copy them out legibly in long-hand for my typist—the last time for the printer, since my typist has gone to live in Dorset and it took less time to write clearly than to wait on the post and proof-read the typing.

(I put this last bit in to show that it is not only the passage of time that accounts for the difference between the professionalism of indexers and the waywardness of authors.)

References


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Unnatural index

Natural history, by Juan Perucho (trans. D. H. Rosenthal; Secker & Warburg, 1989) is, as you would not expect, a novel. It consists of four parts and an ‘Index of Proper Names’, has 179 pages of text, and is described on the jacket as ‘an eerie, elegant novel ... a singular tale of shadow and light, poetic adventure, and political struggle—a stunning philosophical thriller ... rich in ambiguity, impenetrable obscurities and wonderful jokes’.

The ‘Index’ is set full across six pages, listing people, places and species alphabetically. The first line of each entry is indented, with up to six lines of description—but no page references. It ranges from

Pratdip, married Antoni de Montpalau, a celebrated nineteenth-century naturalist, and died in 1874.

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Zurbano: One of the queen’s most valiant generals. He and his two sons were shot without trial on January 21, 1845. One of the saddest episodes in nineteenth-century Spanish politics.

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and includes such helpful glosses as

Otorrinus fantasticus: An indescribable beast.

Otorrinus fantasticus: An indescribable beast.

It is all very reminiscent of the spoof index in Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale fire (see The Indexer 12 (4), Oct. 1981, 200). But that did include page references. Perhaps, for an eerie, philosophical novel, entitled Natural history, this is an appropriately eerie, philosophical index—or can it be an example of the ‘ambiguity, impenetrable obscurities and wonderful jokes’?

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