Linguistic limitation can best be combated by deploying the widest, most sensitive vocabulary, and I would suggest dictionaries and Roget’s thesaurus as the most essential reference books for narrative indexers, to seek out the most precise terms and be aware of all their implications. I use thesauri of vocabulary only to find what terms are available: never to know what are preferred by compilers who have not read the book I am working on—I prefer my own terms.

Indexers should certainly strive to maintain a fine impartiality. We can ensure that we allot space and emphasis in the index strictly in proportion to the importance accorded to topics in the text, and eschew introducing fresh matter expressing our own opinions. Our job is to indicate where in the text opinions are to be found, not to reiterate, reinforce or oppose them.

Like the soul in Tennyson’s ‘Palace of Art’, we must... sit as God, Holding no form of creed but contemplating all.

We cannot, though, compose our indexes of the neutral, nonjudgmental terms necessary for true impartiality, if, in the language which must be our medium, these do not exist.

References

5. See Have you heard the one about ... The Indexer 14 (1) April 1984, 77.

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To the manna born?

One possible purpose of an index is to arouse interest in the text of the book itself. Certainly, some of the entries in the index to The manna machine by George Sassoon and Rodney Dale (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978) are as intriguing (not to say ‘mouth-watering’) as the title itself and arouse curiosity as to what unusual information they may be directing us to.

There is, for example, the frequent use of the ‘equals’ sign, apparently drawing attention to a number of synonymous terms. (This, presumably, is what the introductory note means by the rather cryptic statement that ‘many of the identities given in the text are collated in this index’.) ‘Heaven = sky’ seems straightforward enough; but the significance of many of the others lies well beyond my powers of surmise. What can be the significance of ‘Ancient = transportable’ or ‘Anger = nose’—or, still more intriguing, ‘Beauty = sewer-together’ [an unfortunate ambiguity here, at the very least], or ‘Days of old = 13th part of beard’?

There is even an occasional triple equation, such as: ‘High priest, breastplate of = radio = The Oracle’. And with ‘Leviathan = Lord’s spacecraft’ we seem to be getting into the realms of SF (with more of the F than the S, perhaps). ‘Angels... explain radio’ could belong to a similar realm of fantasy; whereas ‘Electrolux principle’ seems to introduce a more sordidly commercial touch and arouses a suspicion that this index may have been sponsored. (Now that’s a thought. Shouldn’t we be exploring the possibility of commercially sponsored book indexes? Will the Editor offer a prize for the best suggestion of an appropriate sponsor for this year’s winner of the Wheatley Medal? Or would that turn indexing into more of a sport than an art-form? But I digress.)

It is clear enough from the index that the book has a bizarre theme and is concerned with the Kabbalah and Freemasonry and suchlike matters. To that extent the indexer fails completely in my case to make me want to read the book; but then, I’m the kind of person who is quite impervious to even a modicum of the esoteric. It is arguable that the authors seem to be quite out of touch with the real world as most of us encounter it. But there is one entry at least which suggests otherwise. Indeed, having bridged the yawning gap between the Exodus and the world of telecommunications, the indexer seems to issue a solemn warning, applicable especially to the computer enthusiasts among us:

Moses...

communicates by radio 220
punishes machine worshippers 200

Back to your shoeboxes, slaves of the midnight oil, before divine retribution befalls you in the form of a plague of viruses.

JOHN A. VICKERS