Could still do better: the revised index to the Newman biography

John A. Vickers

Ian Kerr’s biography,¹ as all readers of The Indexer will know, was the subject of a lively article by Bernard Levin in The Times in November 1989.² His target was not the book itself (which he calls ‘splendid and enthralling’), but the ‘full, almost heroic awfulness of its index’. It is hardly surprising that in the paperback version now issued the index has been revised.³ How acceptable is the result?

Sadly, the verdict has to be that the new index, though an improvement, still has too many blemishes for it to be worthy of the text it accompanies. The indexer has noted, and partially acted upon, the two major criticisms levelled against the original version. She (or he) has reduced the lengthy strings of undifferentiated page references under ‘Manning’ and ‘Wiseman’ (and also under ‘Froude’, ‘Keble’, ‘Pusey’ and ‘Ullathorne’) by transferring many of them to sub-entries. And she (or he) has rearranged the innumerable subheadings under ‘Newman’ in alphabetical order, as suggested by Mr Levin. But by stopping there the improvements only serve to reinforce the impression of amateurishness.

What more, then, might reasonably have been expected of the reviser?

1. The undifferentiated strings needed to be reduced much more drastically, leaving only an irreducible minimum of general references (some of which might be identified as minor ones by being relegated to the end of the entry, under a heading such as ‘other references’).

2. The same procedure should have been applied to other unhelpfully lengthy strings not cited by Mr Levin (notably, under Pius IX and Propaganda). These have survived unscathed.

3. The twenty-one columns of sub-entries under ‘Newman’ call for more radical treatment than mere alphabetical rearrangement. In the first place, several of them include the kind of undifferentiated strings noted above. Secondly, alphabetization has highlighted the clumsy and repetitive wording of the subheadings. The solution should have been to reorganize them as groups of sub-subheadings. Failure to recognize and respond to this need has led to wasteful and unhelpful repetition (already present in the original index, but disguised by the appalling overall chaos). The following sequence (beginning with a subheading of quite Victorian verbosity) will amply illustrate the point:

Newman, John Henry:...
and Church of England, abandonment of ‘external’ in favour of ‘internal’ notes...
Church of England, his attitude as Catholic to...
and Church of England, disestablishment of...
[and so on through ten more subheadings to:]
on Church of England, true character of...

How much neater, and more helpful, to have arranged these as sub-subheadings of ‘... and Church of England’ (probably adding in four more subheadings that are at present located under ‘Anglican’ and ‘Anglo-Catholic’).

4. However, so lengthy an entry relating to the main subject of the book really needs more sophisticated treatment, involving more than minor surgery; and this is where the amateur indexer almost invariably falls short of the professionalism required. There are two main possibilities here. One is to group the subheadings under appropriate key terms (e.g. ‘life’, ‘personal characteristics’, ‘theology’, ‘opinions’) typographically highlighted. The other (and I think, in such a case as this, the more satisfactory) way would be to disperse as many as possible of the subheadings by treating them as entries in their own right. (This has already been done in the case of the names of persons with whom Newman had dealings, though Wiseman is accorded a sub-entry under ‘Newman’, as well as a main entry under his own name.) This would leave under ‘Newman’ only the biographical and more personal subheadings, and make the index much easier to use.

It appears, however, that any indexer of a history or biography working for the Oxford University Press must toil under an unnecessary handicap which may preclude the production of a satisfactory index—and that this is the fons et origo of one of the main blemishes in the Newman index!

The notes on indexing supplied by OUP to authors who plan to index their own books (previously noted briefly in these pages)⁴ include the following instruction under Sub-Entries:

The order of sub-entries should be consistently either alphabetical or numerical by order of first reference.

These are the two methods of arranging subheadings.
that may be achieved automatically by use of a computer program: dreadfully easy to resort to automatically (literally so!), without reflection as to their suitability for a long entry on the main subject of a biography. Both methods have disadvantages: alphabetical arrangement is easy to consult only if the user knows exactly what term the item he seeks will be listed under; and absurd reversions of chronology occur, such as 'death; divorce; marriage; school.' The development of the narrative does not always follow the chronological order: introductions often anticipate the entire career of the main character or events of the book, sometimes starting with the set piece of the funeral and reflections of colleagues looking back over what is textually to come. Strict observation of page order in the index in such cases is most confusing. And if OUP specifically prohibit the more intelligent, albeit difficult method of arranging subheadings in biographical indexes—logical grouping with typographical differentiation, as outlined above—then perhaps we should reserve for its indexers our sympathy rather than our censure. The stream is being polluted at source.

In the Newman index, however, many incidental blemishes might be listed. For all the index's length, some minor but notable references have been overlooked; e.g. the brief reference on p. 89 to a significantly early example of Newman's concept of doctrinal development. On p. 610 it is the Murphy Riots, not William Murphy himself (who is mentioned only in explanation of the name), that should have been indexed. Most readers of this book would know the term 'Protestant Episcopal Church' and not expect to have to look it up under the less accurate 'American Episcopal Church'. And so on. But it is the major, rather than the incidental, shortcomings that give cause for disquiet.

References
2. Thundering about indexing. The Indexer 17(1) April 1990, 45.

Dr John Vickers is former Principal Lecturer in Religious Studies at the West Sussex Institute of Higher Education; official indexer to the Wesley Works Project; and winner of the Wheatley Medal 1976.

Post script Bernard Levin’s original Times article, ‘The index finger points’, is reprinted in his latest (sixth) volume of journalism, Now read on (Cape, 1990). Its four still-stirring pages have, among others, the following index entries:

- Indexers, Registered 156, 157
- indexes: bad 157-9; good 156; strings, undifferentiated 157-8
- indexing, skilled 156
- Oxford University Press, appalling scandal of 57, 158, 159
- Society of Indexers 156, 157, 159

The acknowledgements again include a gracious tribute to the indexer: ‘Once again I have the pleasure of thanking Oula Jones of the Society of Indexers for her meticulous and essential contribution. One of the articles in this book is about a particularly lamentable index; if only its compiler had had the good sense to entrust it to her!’

Another wrong’un

The index to volume 63, 1989, of Leicestershire Archaeological & Historical Society/Transactions (Indexer anonymous) contains some real howlers. The worst entry of all runs:

Leicestershire/Leicester churches visited by Archdeacon Burnaby, 1793-97, in the order that they appear between pp 48-66 often more than once: Cossington, Twyford, Thorpe Satchville, Hungarton, Leicester churches, Arnesby, [etc.—on the 46 more lines, 3-4 names per line, all in jumbled order]

Is this the final copout? ‘Sort it out yourself!’ seems to be the message of this entry.

Other points: the pottery is not under pottery but under EARLY BRONZE AGE. Moreover, there is a very long pottery report within an article, which does not rate even a ROMANO-BRITISH POTTERY or MEDIEVAL POTTERY entry; nor do the several villas rate a VILLA entry. AXES, PREHISTORIC rate a single page reference for a 6-page article, but their provenance, Charnwood Forest, does not get an entry under Charnwood. Indeed, the place-names are pretty arbitrarily treated, for minor references to JEWRY WALL MUSEUM are solemnly entered.

I was unable to deduce any principles on which this index had been constructed, except that it goes for nice concrete names, with only haphazard attention to subjects. But then that’s almost a cliché, isn’t it?