Indexing 29 volumes of Darwin

Richard Raper

At the Society of Indexers’ AGM, 8 November 1990, Richard Raper gave an account of work on the index that won the Wheatley Medal (see previous pages):

Charles Darwin was born in 1809 and died in 1882, aged 73, and suffered ill-health for much of his life. However, all of us familiar with his work have found ourselves regarding this great man with awe and immense respect for his wide-ranging achievements. Few people could claim to have had a lasting impact on scientific and religious thinking—Charles Darwin is one of them. As well as providing a thorough and convincing explanation of evolution, at a time when the earth was thought to have originated in about 4500 BC, he was a geologist of considerable reputation and a scientist in numerous disciplines, in all of which he was a pioneer.

Among his works Darwin published a definitive classification of barnacles, or Cirripedia, plus results from original studies on fossils, geology, orchids, climbing plants, compost, worms, and animal behaviour, etc. These collected works were edited by the late Paul Barrett and the late R. B. Freeman, both scholars of his writings. Darwin was a prolific writer indeed, and Cambridge University Press have also published a 20-volume collection of his letters. Peter Gantrey, retired librarian of the Darwin collection at Cambridge, let me see a names index to Darwin’s correspondence which proved invaluable in checking the names of the many people mentioned in the text we indexed.

The original indexes, many of which were prepared by Darwin, and (I believe) his grand-daughter, Nora Barlow, were probably thought adequate 100–150 years ago, but are incomplete. They include many strange entries which should not appear in a modern index, such as: ‘Absence of coral reefs’ and ‘Advice to collectors’, both under A. One entry, ‘Doris, eggs of’, sparks off a lively image of what Doris may be doing, whoever Doris was, and I couldn’t resist including her in the consolidated index (without the ‘of’). (Doris is a particular kind of sea-slug.) But it is all too easy to find faults in another index, since perfection, that all-illusory objective, is hardly possible in the sometimes misty scene of information retrieval.

All Darwin’s drawings are now indexed, as are the copious footnotes which refer to his previously unpublished notes. Our index is intended to be definitive for the Latin and common names of all the creatures and plants mentioned in his books, and also lists the names of all people and places. The index is 333 pages long, and contains about 40,000 entries. We hope it will be of significant use to scientists, archivists, and scholars throughout the world.

Larger projects such as this are a particularly exciting challenge. From considerable experience in compiling large indexes, though, I find that some publishers are insufficiently aware that larger indexes present problems that rarely occur in smaller works. For example: establishing the terms or language to be used; maintaining consistency; consolidating others’ work; avoiding long strings of page references; and in historical works, defining the order of listing for identical names. Consulting an indexer at the start of such a project might well be a good move.

It behoves publishers at the planning stage, to consider also how the benefits of an index might properly finance its compilation. One way could be to promote the index as part of marketing strategy; another, to gain the interest of charities and other institutions. One hundred extra sets of this edition, through effective marketing, at something like £1,400 per set, might surely yield better support for financing the proper cost of the index as well as benefiting the publisher.

The task, however, has been very worthwhile, and I am delighted to receive the Wheatley Medal on my behalf and that of the team who worked with me on it.

The one about the cartoons index

Gary Larson is an off-beat American cartoonist who has produced several collections of his ‘Far Side’ newspaper cartoons. His latest, Wiener dog art: a Far Side collection, has an equally weird and humorous three-page index. A–S and U–Z are listed without entries. T has all the goodies, in four columns, from

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