INDEXES REVIEWED
edited by Norman Hillyer

These extracts from reviews do not pretend to represent a complete survey of all reviews in journals and newspapers. We offer only a selection from quotations that members have sent in.

Our reproduction of comments is not a stamp of approval from the Society of Indexers upon the reviewer’s assessment of an index.

Extracts are arranged alphabetically under the names of publishers, within the sections: Indexes praised; Two Cheers! Indexes censured; Indexes omitted; Obiter dicta.

Indexes praised


‘Complete with charts, search examples, an excellent index, and even a humorous article from Punch...’ (what more could one want?)


‘The addition of bold type in the index to highlight the primary description of a disorder, the display of page numbers on the individual volume spines, and the larger typeface greatly add to the text’s usefulness as a quick reference.’


‘...a final handy keyword index means crucial tabs can be kept.’


‘Two detailed indexes of names and subjects add immensely to the usefulness of the book as a work of reference.’ (but see another view under ‘Two Cheers’)


‘Page numbers, by the way, have no reference use in most directories. Each entry has its own number, a device wonderfully used when one turns to the indices (sic) of company and individual names. You don’t have to find a page and search through it.’


‘Other notable aspects are the excellent cross referencing and comprehensive index.’


‘I assessed the usefulness of this book in a general medical clinical setting by making it available to several physician staff members and nurse practitioners for several months. All the users found the therapeutic-use index and the pharmacology-action index especially helpful.’


‘The full scope and variety of Gladstone’s interests are revealed in the magnificent 862-page, three-part Index: of over 20,000 persons, of his gargantuan reading (about 21,000 titles by some 4,500 authors), of subjects... A life of Gladstone could be written from the Index.’


‘But it is volume XIV that is Mr Matthew’s greatest triumph. He sought, he tells us, to make the index “entertaining and suggestive” as well as comprehensive. He has succeeded: the index is more enjoyable than the diaries themselves... a tour not only of Victorian high culture... but also of the byways of 19th-century political, religious and literary life. Then there is the subject index, into which he has injected enough interest and humour to make it a pleasurable browse. Here are a few samples:

Irish question: “G much oppressed in nerve of bigness of”

Parisians: “on the coach, gross language of”

Roman Catholic church: “G wishes papalists would go forward to Middle Ages”

Victoria, Queen: “concern and pain caused her by G”

“G dreams of breakfasting with”


‘...an essential for any reference book is a good index, and we are provided with clear indexes of passages referred to and subjects. This work should serve its purpose well.’


‘What makes The Gale Book of Averages unique is its large subject and numerical indexes found at the end of the volume. The latter index ranks averages by numerical value: money, weight, speed, time, etc... The volume is easy to use (thanks to its indexing), lucidly straightforward, and well put together.’


‘The absence of a bibliography is somewhat moderated by the inclusion of an excellent index.’

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'The priorities for a popular reference work are simple. How easily and quickly can you locate the information you need? How digestible and comprehensive is it? Two quick rules of thumb: (1) Quality research is exact dates, not just years and months, and (2) No index, no use! First on my list and best of the lot... has no less than three indices (sic)—chronology (approximately 7,000 entries), places and subjects—and is alive with anecdote and humour.'


'The book contains 18 pages of notes, 3 pages of suggestions for further reading and indexes of biblical references, subjects and names. I suspect that this will enhance its overall value as a reference book.'


'The footnotes, index and cross referencing are excellent.' Report of comment by co-author Jack Black at book launch, 12 April 1994:

'The index produced is the best he has ever seen in any publication, recognising the huge significance of a work having a thorough and accessible index.' (index by Elizabeth Moys, SI Treasurer.)


'The volume is indexed by author and “concept.” The latter helps to locate appropriate quotations that appear under other topical headings. The book is not only fun to browse but easy to use... An intelligent topical division and the usable subject index help to locate relevant quotations easily.'


'The work contains an excellent index by title and subject.'


'A good index, appropriate photographs, adequate documentation, and a reading list on military strategy are the book's strengths.' (index by Lina Burton)


'It is a good source book, not to be read, but rather to be referred to for facts such as the chronology of any of the persons identified in the excellent index and bibliography, or a little bit of information about a figure of little renown.'


'The index alone is 40 pages... It has become extremely useful to me, especially to refresh quickly and concisely various syndromes and named diseases whose definition and significance may have been lost since professional school. Apparently the authors were given the task and opportunity to identify key words in their chapters for inclusive, thorough indexing.'


'The index, comprehensive as always, lists proper names under categories such as "Architects, surveyors and builders", "Benefactors", "Ministers", "Preachers”, "Sculptors and monumental masons", with all names repeated under "Surnames", which is an improvement over the normal method of listing each surname separately.'


'The index, about twice as large as in previous editions, is strikingly good, clearly with the input of several of the authors, and is much more extensive than key words, for it refers to concepts as well as facts.' (we should hope so)


'I found the index to be one of the best I have seen. I used the text as a reference source for two weeks when I was covering our Shock/Trauma/Respiratory Intensive Care Unit. The index provided a rapid method of finding subject matter during morning rounds.'


'At first glance, as with earlier editions, the organization appears somewhat confusing—several sections with grouped chapters on organ-specific illnesses, specific microorganisms, and mechanisms of illnesses. However, I have come to rely on the index, which is well organized and user friendly, and lends a hand in locating desired information.'


'The index is detailed with “see also” references, and the larger headings are broken down by subheadings; the major articles are identified by boldface type and the tables by italic type.'


'With a detailed table of contents, bibliography, and an
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"Primarily though, this is a directory and over 250 pages are spent on succinct descriptive entries with an average of twelve to a page; rounded out with an index of names and, most useful, a subject index."


"Thank God, the book also has an extensive index. Besterman's failure to include an index in Dawson's earlier Baculaud d'Arnaud (1976) was a crime against scholarship, since those two volumes were a gold mine of information it was often impossible to locate. In every respect this volume is a monument of erudition and a landmark study in the history of the book trade."


"The index is extensive. It includes not only company and personal names, but also places, topics and themes."


"The index is well produced—the diversity of some of the entries gives an indication of the breadth of topics covered: William Ewart Gladstone, Marshall McLuhan, piracy, Korean bookshops, Bird Watchers Digest, ancient Rome. (index by Hazel Bell)"

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"The several indices (sic) are also helpful, although inexplicably the author ignores the footnotes and only cites names that appear in the discussions proper."


"Indexes include a name index, with brief biographic entries for some of the individuals. The detailed hierarchical subject index requires acclimation and could have been improved by changes in format to include page headings and the use of boldface type."


"Any reference work, especially one of this magnitude, is affected by the quality of its indexes. Cross references in the indexes, as in the text, make the user's search easier and more efficient. The name index is excellent. . . . The subject index, as the editor states, was designed to emphasize that this is a history and geography of diseases, not of medicine. Disease main entries have helpful subentries for area and time period. Long entries (ones continuing to a second column or page), whether by place or disease, are not as easily usable as they might have been if the editor had taken advantage of boldface type and column and page headings. The few continuation headings that are used are not easily seen."


"At the end of the guide, a very useful index is appended. The index gives references to collections, names of librarians, names of individuals, and subjects. References are made to the entry of number of the institution rather than the page numbers. It would probably be easier to locate the item if the page number is (sic) used instead."


"Entries are clustered in . . . eight major categories. Access beyond these categories is provided by a subject index. Unfortunately, the index only covers five of the eight categories, and in one striking omission, Usenet news groups, about as subject-specific as one could hope for, are not included. The subject index covers forty pages, averaging between ten and twenty subject categories and about fifty individual entries per page; this serves to confirm that subject access, while useful, is limited."


"As in past years, books are indexed by author and title, and a directory of publishers is appended. This edition also includes a handy subject index. The editors (sic) occasionally note adult language and themes, but they seem to do so inconsistently, and, because there is no special entry for it in the subject index, fiction won't be as easy to pull out as it was in some of the previous editions."


"The inclusion of an analytical index helps make this volume a particularly useful reference and teaching tool . . . Unfortunately I found the coverage of the index a little disappointing. How frustrating it is to remember a passage, but not the relevant paragraph number, and not to be able to find it using the index."


"[for biographical entries] the reader has . . . to hunt around for the precise references. The index of place names, however, is a proper index and has been sensibly compiled. The two blank pages at the end of the book should have provided the missing index of explorers."

Two Cheers!


"The several indices (sic) are also helpful, although inexplicably the author ignores the footnotes and only cites names that appear in the discussions proper."


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INDEXES REVIEWED

Indexes censured


'The only fault to be found is with the highly inaccurate index—perhaps taken unchanged from an earlier edition.'


'This year-by-year record of the roles, contributions and effects of women in history contains 13,000 often surprising entries. A mighty and fascinating tome deserving a richer index.' (dare we explain this as Irish?)


'Unfortunately the production is marred by a cumbersome layout, numerous typographical errors and an eccentric method of indexing.' (dare we explain this as Irish?)


'...the index, which is deservedly anonymous and rightly titled "selective", is very unsatisfactory and disappointing in a work which is otherwise so useful.' ('selective' an excuse, not a reason)


'The index is cumbersome: entries include roman numerals identifying sections and standard numbers identifying pages for the subjects (analogous to chapters) within the section. The top of each index page lists the volume, but it is still awkward to use. Each section has its own title page that lists the "chapters" in that section, but the page numbers are not given, so one must guess at the approximate page from the sequence of the subjects or retreat to the index in volume 1.'


'It is ... rather odd to use the definite article "al-" as the determinant of whether a word should fall under A or elsewhere in the index. On the basis of such a procedure, every noun in Arabic could be listed under A.' (publisher definitely nodded)


'The index—name and subject—helps remedy some of the drawbacks inherent in the arrangement, but it is neither thorough nor precise enough to help locate all the pertinent information on a topic contained in the work. For example, though the annotations often enumerate subjects covered in the collection or repository, these subjects are often not reflected in the index.'


'The index lacks breath (sic), depth, and structure, and at a 3.4% level of indexing appears inefficient as an access tool.' (compiled by an indexer in short pants?)


'This "female Ulysses", as Henry James described her, needs a biographer who is a match for her ... Shari Benstock is emphatically not that person. But her laborious book of facts, complete with an excellent bibliography and a very bad index, will have to do until the real thing comes along.'


'The book is well illustrated with photographs and maps, but the index unfortunately does not include many of the names and places mentioned in the text. An adequate index for a book of this size would be two or three times as extensive as this one.' (and this is the third edition)


'The Experimental Basic Index must be experienced to be believed. The entry for Wellisch (no forename) is used here to illustrate the index’s convoluted structure. The boldfaced locator is #256.5. This is neither a page number nor a paragraph number; it refers to the position of the heading in the Experimental Systematic Index, arranged hierarchically, which in turn refers to the paragraph number in which Wellisch is cited. I grant the advantages of hierarchical display of descriptions (Weinberg 1993), but the index to a book should complement the logical arrangement of the text, not replicate it; an index should also not require triple lookup.

A one-page sample Alphabetical Subject Index is included (p. 250), with references to the hierarchy from main headings, and to paragraph numbers from subheadings. This dual system of locators is unexplained in the headnote, which announces that "The complete alphabetical (sic) index can be ordered from the publisher at cost price." (have INDEKS Verlag sold any?)


'User-friendly as it is, the text is dense and it is often difficult to track down a specific point (chapter sections and the index are sketchy).’ (how to market books?)


'A major weakness is the index. Since this is the route of entry in most cases that the book is used, better cross-referencing would preclude much of the aforementioned need for initial familiarity with the book’s contents. For example,
there are no entries for cough, fatigue, malaise, or sleep, just to cite a few. Indeed, the index seems to have been compiled by a nonmedical person, since “aortic insufficiency” and “aortic regurgitation” appear on successive lines.


‘If no review was done of the external format of the index, it seems that even less attention was paid to its completeness. A category of entries completely absent from the index is names of authors whose work is discussed or cited in the text. There is no merged alphabetic list of references at the end of the book, which in any case would only allow one to determine that a given work was cited, not where or by whom... Because citation analysis forms such a large component of the information science literature, ASIS editors should be aware of the importance of citation indexing and the many functions it serves, such as the study of interdisciplinarity.’


‘...and an index—this last in microscopic type, however.’ (but it is the Lilliput Press)

INDEXES REVIEWED


‘...and an index—this last in microscopic type, however.’


‘A cursory examination of the index revealed a few errors and omissions, most notably: the lack of an introduction to explain the use of various print styles for certain entries; the lack of more see also references, which would be helpful, for example, to connect “/MAJ” with “Descriptors, major”; and the use of long strings of undifferentiated locators in a number of the entries.’


‘Most indexes, no matter how bad, are at least somewhat useful. However, [this] index...is so poor as to be almost worthless...[reviewer lists two pages of complaints, and concludes] All of this leads me, as an occasional editor, to an unpleasant theory: perhaps one reason for a dumb index, or no index at all, is the fear that an intelligent indexer will uncover errors and inconsistencies at a stage when these are very costly to fix. In a book as fraught with difficult terminology as a gardening book, the indexer’s special perspective could well be viewed by the editor and publisher as a valuable last check on the quality of the work. Why not?’


‘Because the book is designed to be read as needed, by chapter or section, much of the information is repeated or reworded from section to section, with minor but sometimes significant variations. The index, however, is skimpy, making it difficult to retrieve these nuggets of information.’


‘This (unfortunately badly indexed) book makes a splendid effort to present a clear, richly illuminated view of Scotland, but sometimes it’s Scotland with a dodgy battery.’ (affecting index, too)


‘Have you heard of shrink-wrapping? Peter Ackroyd’s massive biography of Dickens (1990) is now out in Mandarin paperback, though next to its original it looks like a pebble alongside a boulder...The index is now a strange, sadly-mangled affair. The whole book has been reduced to half its original size. (What hasn’t been cut are the enthusiastic comments from reviewers, which somewhat misleadingly festoon the back cover.) Ackroyd’s happy: he agreed with Neil Taylor’s cuts.’ (but did he look at the index?)

Rev. in Observer 17 July 1994 (yes, again).

‘This is a disgracefully shoddy edition which baldly announces on the title page, “Abridged from the Sinclair-Stevenson Dickens”, but includes no other explanation of what has been left out, or who has performed the surgery...the index is shortened...and there are heavy cuts all through with whole paragraphs removed on almost every page. What does Ackroyd think of this truncation?’


‘The omissions in the index are legion: there is no Kelvin Mackenzie, no Piers Morgan, no Rupert Murdoch; none of the photographers who earn the money stalking this poor Sloane Ranger. Their by-lines and agencies...adorn the glossily printed colour photographs, but their story is left untold. And no Andrew Morton in the index, either. In the telling of what might be the death-throes of the House of Windsor, leaving out the hacks who made the lives of the poor wretched royals so miserable is like Hamlet without the skull.’


‘I wish there had been a bibliography. As it is, the only way to track down a book is to find the first reference in the text from the list of authors and then turn to the notes; and since names in the notes are not included in the index even this is not always possible.’

Penguin: The buildings of Ireland: vol. 1, North Leinster, by C. Casey & A. Rowan (1993, 576 pp, £30). Rev. by...

'The indexes, of artists, patrons and places, help guide the user... This mechanism is, however, imperfect... The index of places, intended to supplement the gazetteer arrangement, could have been fuller. It is not easy, for example, to find Castletown Bellew unless you know where to look. Sliabh na Caillaigh in the index directs you to Loughcrew, but when you turn to it the great chain of passage graves are (sic) not found.'


'The logic of John Stuart Mill, or of computers, might usefully have been applied to the index. Why are Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and Shakespeare's Hamlet entered directly under title, while there is a "see" reference from Phaedra to Plato, and Great Expectations and Hard Times are entered under Dickens without cross-references? As ever, there are too many examples of "see" references being used when it would be (or more) economical to make additional entries.'


'... but it has to be said that the major disappointment is its index which is sadly deficient. Many names are omitted, there are errors in the page references and the subject entries are quite inadequate... It is a great pity that a poor index should mar this informative, thoughtful and well-written book which will be an essential source for all interested in the history of the British press.'


'In fact, scores of women in the period spanned by Women in England kept diaries and wrote letters and even (as Dale Spender pointed out) novels—from aristocrats such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to actresses such as Charlotte Cibber. But Laurence seems loath to plunge into their passions and prejudices. Cibber wrote the most energetic of autobiographies—she tells us about her passion for cross-dressing—yet all we discover of her here is that she ran a puppet theatre (and she fails to make it into the wretched index).'


'The topical arrangement with an author index works fairly well, though interesting studies of evangelicalism, marriage, and Native Americans are buried in the "miscellaneous" section, where the absence of a subject index is most keenly felt.'


'A farrage of peppery asides, rapid plot summaries, old-fashioned moral platitudes, frequent repetitions... The tone is conversational, even chatty; unapologetically digressive; very often defensive and bristling. We hardly need to be told that the author disdains academics, and it is not surprising that his book contains no index.'


'... and, for my part, I don't think I will ever buy a book again that omits the essential courtesy of an index.'
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...the amount of detail is astonishing and it is easy to get lost in it... Unfortunately, there is no index. If you intend to create your own disaster plan, or need to know how to repair that valuable monograph stored in some remote location or even in the stacks, this book is for you. (a good example of a disaster plan: 556 pages of an astonishing amount of detail, and no index)


'When this book goes into paperback—as it should—it should be widely read and it should have an index, one worthy of its text.'


'The one glaring omission is the lack of an index.'


'The book is better on vine diseases, soils and wine regions than it is on actual producers. This makes it difficult for the non-professional to use, especially given the absence of an index.'


'It is a splendid short account of the New Testament teaching about the death of Jesus, but... An index of scripture references would have helped the reader to track down Professor Hooker's exegesis of specific passages.'


'The weakest part of this package is the manual, which is redundant and confusing. This is particularly unfortunate, since this is relatively complex software. A well-written manual with a good index would benefit this application immensely.'


'The only major quibble is that, astonishingly, it doesn't have an index. Perhaps it was confused with an appendix and removed?'


'So often, when one is preparing a memoir. Perhaps that is why the book provides no real interior to his personality and omits an index. Is it all being saved up?'

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'And an index, or at least a more detailed table of contents, would have been helpful, because this is a book worth coming back to and using as a reference by anyone with an interest in the book scene in Russia today, or indeed by anyone interested in getting a feel for just what it is like trying to run an honest business of any kind in Russia.'


'Maddeningly, in such a densely detailed book, there is no index—only a contents list.'


'...but our main regret is that there is neither an index nor even a short bibliography for further reading.' (Soli Deo Gloria?)


'Finally, it is unfortunate that an index was not provided for such a useful and stimulating book.'


'The publication is well structured, but there is no index.' (structure deficient)


'The absence of an index is a flaw in such a work.' (but there are only three volumes to skim)


'One weakness is the lack of a general index.' (missed Opportunity)


'It's great to see this back in print, but those lazy curs at Vintage could at least have added an index.'

Obiter dicta


'Few things are more infuriating than buying a book and being patronised by its author. Although Dimbleby claims to be neutral ("no fair-minded and compassionate reader would seek to attribute blame either to the prince or the princess"), a glance at the index would suggest otherwise. Under "Charles: marriage and children", we are directed to: "the
princess's volatile behaviour", "the princess's jealousy of Camilla Parker Bowles", "the princess's resentment of his interests", "the princess attempts to control his life", and Charles "seeks psychiatric help for the princess". A very pretty list for the two princes to look up about their mother in a book authorised by their father.'


'It should not be worthy of note, but sadly it is, that *Children First* is produced to a scrupulously high standard: innocent of literals, and equipped with proper apparatus and an index.'


'If that is not enough to make you want to fork out your money, look at the index. Beethoven is there as well as the big bang, Shakespeare as well as slit detectors and Wimbledon tennis as well as white dwarfs. Superlatives are in order. So are two copies, one to lend to friends.' (indexes sell books)

Indexing manuals is a third challenge. Without good cross-referencing, the user is lost. The information is somewhere in that 600-page book, but unless you know what to look under, it’s inaccessible. Even Microsoft’s indexes, which I rate among the best, could be improved .... Poor indexing seems also to be the glaring weakness of the many hapless on-line help systems I’ve seen. I’ve had numerous unhappy instances of being unable to locate a reference in help, even when I know it’s there.

William Casey, on computer manuals, Washington Post, 13 June 1994

Boolean searching in information retrieval

Boolean search logic is based on the symbolic logic of the mathematician George Boole (1815—64). Most searchers use it, whether efficiently or inefficiently, consciously or unconsciously; in effect it provides a model for describing what happens intellectually during a search. The logic is made explicit in computer searching. The three ‘logical operators’ used are:

*Logical product* (using the operator AND)—a class which lies at the intersection of two or more classes. The term is used in searching to retrieve documents which contain two or more sought concepts: e.g., a search for items on ‘education in Scotland’ could require the search statement: education AND Scotland.

*Logical difference* (using the operator NOT)—a class the members of which exclude the members of another class or classes. The term is used in searching to retrieve documents which contain a common specified concept, but which exclude another specified concept: e.g., a search for items on ‘bull-fighting other than in Spain’ could require the search statement: bull-fighting NOT Spain.

*Logical sum* (using the operator OR)—consists of all the members of two or more classes including those which belong to more than one of the classes. The term is used in searching to indicate a set of documents which contain one or both of two (or more) related concepts: e.g., a search for items on ‘homeopathic treatments and/or naturopathic treatments’ could require the search statement: homeopathy OR naturopathy.

For speedier searching, operators can be combined in search statements, e.g.:

(trees or shrubs) AND water gardens
(concerti AND clarinets) NOT Mozart