A friend has sent me a singular document. It is a photocopy of page 255 of the fourth edition of Walton's *Compleat angler*. The lower half of the page, left blank by the printer, bears a manuscript note concerning a fish not mentioned in the text, in a late seventeenth-century hand, but whether in the hand of the master himself I cannot tell. For my present purpose I may quote him and say 'I might prove it, but I think it is needless'. No use is made of the note in the subsequent edition, but since it may be of interest to present-day readers, I reproduce it here.

Your Information is said to take many forms, like Proteus who wrestled with Menelaus, and be hard to catch. Yet, like the eel, he may be taken in any season, if he can but be lured from the bank in which, being of timid disposition, he makes his habitation. He is reported to live in rivers and has been sought diligently in the Weaver and the Shannon. If you have a byte, and succeed in landing your Information on line or through use of the net, it may be cooked in diverse ways.

Unfortunately no more specific instructions are given.

As chance would have it, I had already been reminded of Walton's text by certain parallels I had noted in the report of an experiment to discover how readers used indexes and what factors impeded success in using the index to find information in a book. First among 'incorrect assumptions' said by the authors to be held by indexers is: 'A typical back-of-the-book index is an intuitive structure which most people readily grasp'. It is also erroneously assumed, the authors go on to say, that the user frames his search for information in the index in the same way as the indexer organizes his idea of the information in the book, and that 'syndetic and classificatory structures are the most important means for indicating relationships among concepts in an index; format is secondary. ... Users do not seem to read introductions to indexes'.

I doubt whether serious indexers do assess indexing as Venator assessed angling 'which [the fisherman] calls an art, but doubtless it is an easy one'. Nor do I see how relationships among concepts can be shown in an index otherwise than by 'syndetic and classificatory structures'. If a text is full of substance and complex, however clearly the index is set out, however consistent the division of topics and the use of terminology, with whatever foresight alternative approaches and directives to the user are provided, if the user does not read the introduction to the index, or does not even know the alphabet, or, as Liddy and Jorgensen report of one student taking part in their experiment, has 'no
comprehension at all of index structure', how can a search prove successful? Can people who cannot use an index be called literate? Ability to consult reference works and to use indexes is an essential element in literacy.

Now, my public library has a whole shelf of books on angling. The coarse fisherman is instructed how to put his rod together, and bait his line and cast it, how to tie the proper knots, how to play and land a fish. The fly-fisher is shown how to select and tie flies, he is told the characteristics of different species of fish and of different stretches of water, how to handle boats, how to gain access to fishing waters. So why should anyone go fishing for information and expect to land a trout after dangling a worm on a bent pin in the canal? Would 'the unfortunate souls who cannot find their way through such a maze as an index' take a journey on the London Underground without first looking at the map?

It is true that dedicated teachers and librarians (not only in schools) try to impart 'study skills' to students, the more successfully when such efforts are incorporated into the whole curriculum and deliberately practised in contexts other than 'English' studies. It is to be hoped that the dwindling number of teachers in our schools will consider such exercises to be eventual time-savers rather than additional chores for which there is no time.

The semi-literate who cannot use an index are doubtless unaware of the need for any preliminary study. Lacking motivation to look for the logic in a compressed guide to a text set out for their benefit, they fail to profit by it. Alan Seal makes the point that periodical indexes 'usually are published separately, often in abstracting and indexing periodicals and now increasingly online, so that the user has to make a specific effort to consult them. This makes it a clearly identifiable task and thus a fruitful activity for study'. (My italics). The compact Oxford English dictionary, micrographically reproduced in a single volume, is accompanied by a user's guide (and also a magnifying glass). The novelty of the new methods excites curiosity; back-of-the-book indexes are con temptfully familiar.

It seems that some Piscator is needful, to show where to fish, what bait (taken from stored knowledge or a thesaurus) to use to suit the species and bigness of the fish and the strength of the stream, what strategy to follow in seeking out the quarry, when to throw back an insufficient catch and try again. 'For you are to remember, I told you Angling is an art, either by practice, or a long observation, or both. . . . All the further use I shall make of this shall be, to advise anglers to be patient, and forbear swearing, lest they be heard and catch no fish.'

Jeremy Fisher

References

1. Walton, Izaak. The compleat angler; or, the contemplative man's recreation. 4th ed. Printed for R. Marriot. 1668.

Indexing offered, 1892

The following notice appeared in Englishwoman's Review, 15 October 1892:

AN INDEXING OFFICE.—The need for a good index is universally recognised, but the difficulty of getting one made in time by a person who has studied indexing as an art is often insuperable. To meet this need Miss Nancie Baily has opened an office at 3, Keppel Street, Bedford Square, W.C., which will undertake all kinds of indexing, and which we are glad to hear has already met with much success.

Miss Baily's circular states that she is prepared to index books, reviews, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, &c., at reasonable charges, and in as short a space of time as is consistent with accuracy; and as attesting her qualification to undertake the direction of such an office, refers to the fact that for the years 1889, 1890, 1891, she was sole indexer of Hansard's Parliamentary Debates; and quotes following extracts from letters. The Speaker's Secretary writes:—"The Speaker wishes you success in your undertaking, and he feels sure you will meet with it, as he is well aware how qualified you are to perform the work of indexing, &c."

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