A Marshland index—or ‘Indexing for the Hell of it’

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Expresses the author’s appreciation of the fiction of S. L. Bensusan, and describes his voluntary compilation of an index to it.

A project on which I have been engaged, intermit
tently, for a number of years has the virtue of combin
ing two enthusiasms dear to my heart: the pleasurable process of indexing which (next to listening to music and making love) is probably the most enjoyable and effective form of relaxation within my experience, and the fictional writings of S. L. Bensusan. So I have no difficulty in understanding Hazel Bell’s passionate advocacy of indexes for fiction. Indeed, I am her ideal customer, since I can never remember halfway through chapter 2 which character is which and am always having to turn back to earlier chapters to remind myself what has actually happened so far. An index would often be a godsend.

Not all, or just any, fiction, though. I can easily imagine a devotee of Agatha Christie or Arthur C. Clarke eagerly setting out to compile a master index to the works of her favourite author; but this is not for me, since I find who-dun-its and sci. fi. equally unreadable. Bensusan is, as they say these days, another thing.

Samuel Levi Bensusan (1872-1958) was a Londoner by birth and a free-lance journalist by profession; and one of his admirable traits was the high level of skill and expertise he brought to all that he did. Yet he is conspicuously absent from reference works in which you might reasonably expect to find him, such as DNB or The Oxford Companion to English Literature. Nor will you find obituaries without quite an arduous search: was there some reason for this which I have yet to discover?

An enormously prolific writer, the range of his work was as impressive as his output; but it is with his fictional writing about life in the Essex countryside, and especially the peninsula that lies between the Blackwater and Crouch estuaries, that I am concerned here. He called it ‘Marshland’ and in spite of the sweeping changes it has seen during our century—with the impact of radio, the internal-combustion engine and, not least, the building of a nuclear power station at Bradwell—it remains for the initiated as inescapably ‘Bensusan country’ as Dorset is Thomas Hardy’s Wessex.

Most of Bensusan’s ‘Marshland’ output took the form of short sketches, many of them almost too short to be called ‘short stories’, but ‘chock full o’ nuggets’ as the Americans would say. They appeared in various magazines and were collected over the years into a series of volumes. The first, A Countryside Chronicle appeared in 1907 and, like its successor, Father William (1912), provided only a faint gleam of the glories that were to come. There was a long pause; then, between 1926 and 1955 appeared thirteen collections, culminating in Marshland Voices, slimmer than its predecessors, but lacking none of their freshness and shrewd observation. There were also three full-length novels—which I have yet to lay my hands on.

My own introduction to Bensusan was during the war years and over the wireless (before it became ‘radio’), where from time to time he read one of his own stories in a gravelly voice that I can still hear quite distinctly. (Unfortunately, none of the broadcasts that were recorded seems to have survived.) I did not read any for myself until 1949 when I came across a battered copy of These from God’s Own Country (1947) in a secondhand shop. Two days in bed with ‘flu provided the opportunity to read it from cover to cover—which is no more the way to imbibe vintage Bensusan than swigging wine out of a tankard. Since then I have learned the art of sipping.

Over the years I have tracked down all the ‘Marshland’ series and a number of his other books (essays, natural history, travel books, art and architecture. . . you name it); and this article is part of a private celebration of having recently found and acquired the most elusive of the volumes, Marshland Echoes (1937). (I suspect that the remains of the edition was lost or pulped during the war; and, like most of his books, it was never reprinted.)

Which brings me to the matter of indexing. It is now several years, longer indeed than I can recall or would want to calculate, since I began to read through the ‘Marshland’ series in chronological order and in the process to compile an index to them. Many other, more urgent projects have stood in the way of my
progress, which is more like a leisurely stroll through an attractive landscape, taking snapshots along the way to prolong and enhance memory, than the usual pressurized scramble all too familiar to working in-
Woodpecker, Solomon, of Meadowbank, Mr Smallbone's ploughman and factotum: the range of his skills, Idylls 290; Comment 16-17,31 contemplates the life of a 'gentleman', but is dissuaded by the Tempor'y Man, SW 102-4

...conversations with
...a 'furriner' (who turns out to be an insurance agent), DC 128-31
...a pig, Idylls 4-5
...a sign-post, Idylls 105-6; cf 188
...makes the most of a wet day, Comment 137-40; cf 164-5
...a reluctant cricketer, SW 136-8

For present purposes I have arranged the above subheadings in an alphabetical order of a kind; but as they proliferate, alphabetization becomes increasingly meaningless and unhelpful as a searching aid, and it may well be that in the end 'order of publication' will prove the only logically consistent one.

Because a whole culture and way of life, now gone for ever, are depicted in amused but loving detail, the topics covered in these stories are many and varied. Rat-catching; pig-killing (always when the moon is waxing); age-old superstitions and customs; the rapid spread and growth of rumour through the rural grapevine; attitudes to artists, 'Bolshevits', children, tramps; deep-seated suspicion (and exploitation) of 'furriners', including those who come from that far-off, unknown place called 'Lunnon' (reputed by some to be even larger than St Brigands-on-Sea); the sinister machinations of 'Govinment' and its minions: all find a place and are topics of conversation in the taproom of the Wheatsheaf or round the village pump (for we have no piped water as yet and are highly suspicious of the motives of the authorities when they propose to install stand-pipes).

Finally, there is the local dialect, with its own idioms and vocabulary. I am not qualified to say how faithfully or accurately Bensusan observed and recorded the speech of rural Essex, beyond the conviction that it 'rings true' and, now and then, coincides with the East Anglian forms I remember from rural Suffolk some years ago. Some future researcher may bless Bensusan for preserving what has become a dead language. For the moment it is enough that the words and turns of phrase—and the (mis)pronunciations—he records are of great interest in themselves. My favourite is a sinister (and, according to Martha Ram, often fatal) malady called 'girks in th' stomach'. I've not yet positively identified this (OED gives 'girks' as a variation of 'jerks', i.e. 'muscular contractions', which may help some). But when I do, I have every intention of avoiding it.

And what good, as little Peterkin might say, may come of all this? Well, if some hard-pressed PhD student one day finds it serves his or her purpose, that will be a bonus and (s)he's very welcome to it. After all, if you stop to think about it (which you'd much better not do), a high proportion of the entries we make as we compile our indexes must stand a pretty slender chance of ever being used. But that's no reason for omitting them, still less for not compiling an index at all. In any case, once you begin to justify doing what gives you harmless pleasure, there's little hope for you. So, though treated with the distrust and reserve properly shown to 'furriners' by all right-minded Marshlanders, I shall continue to haunt the Bensusan country as long as I'm allowed to. Unlike the Shakespeare country and Wordsworth's Lakeland, it's preserved from both over-crowding and commercialization, and I heartily commend it to all indexers under stress.

Reference