

A Marshland index— or 'Indexing for the Hell of it'

John A. Vickers

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, intermittently, for a number of years has the virtue of combining 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 indexers. Indeed, one of the reasons for my tardy pace is, I suspect, that I not only enjoy the views too much to want to hurry, but like Stevenson prefer hopeful travel to the moment of arrival. Still, I *would* like to reach my destination before I am called away to a more remote one: hopeful travel does depend on expecting to arrive sometime or other!

One thing, however, I have few illusions or false expectations about. It is highly unlikely that the end result will have any commercial prospects. Given the widespread neglect, or total ignorance, of Bensusan's writings,* a published index to them seems to be a natural non-starter. The most I can realistically hope is that the Library at the University of Essex, which has a Bensusan collection, might give it room. So I continue on my leisurely way. And in other respects, my Bensusan indexing is quite unlike any other I do these days. For one thing, I have disinvented the wheel and am indulging in that quaint and all but forgotten folk art known to our unsophisticated ancestors as 'shoebox indexing'. 5" x 3" is just about my measure in this case. CINDEX for once doesn't get a look in. This makes it possible to do most of the indexing in an easy chair, and without extensively and permanently defacing the books on which I am working (no disposable page proofs in this case): once a book is in print, it becomes a sacred object.

In other respects this self-indulgence in the 'Joy of Indexing' is very similar to any other index-making. There are headings and subheadings, and even cross-references, to be devised; decisions to be taken on what to include or leave out; and even that rather old-fashioned choice between multiple indexes and a single consolidated one. I am, in fact, working with four separate categories: places, persons, subjects and language. So far they have been kept in separate compartments, and it is highly unlikely that these will be combined in a single alphabetical sequence at any stage. As we Marshlanders see it, they really don't mix.

Places, for example, have an interest of their own as components of Bensusan's half-real, half-fictional world. As Hardy did for his own writings and Ronald Knox did, tongue-in-cheek, for Trollope's Barchester, it is possible to map, step by step, the 'Marshland' countryside. For some of his places there is independent evidence of their location in the 'real' world.

*There is some evidence of a revival of interest, however slight so far. Some second-hand booksellers have stopped saying 'S. L. *who?*' in response to my enquiries. And one of his titles—though not one of the 'Marshland' series—has recently been reprinted. I might after all be in time to cash in on the boom.

'Maychester' with its 'Hard' is Bradwell-on-Sea (minus the power station); 'Market Waldron' is Maldon, and so on. Many incidental geographical localities are, of course, more elusive—purely imaginary, or at most composite. I am sure that The Wheatsheaf, Solomon Woodpecker's favourite haunt, combines the essence of several of the author's favourite country inns. There are discrepancies which emerge from the indexing; but on the whole Bensusan's geography is remarkably consistent over a period of more than a quarter of a century, and a whole landscape, as well as a way of life, gradually comes into focus.

People, too, gradually become more and more flesh-and-blood characters as one's acquaintance with them matures: particularly the inner circle of characters who figure repeatedly in the stories and are obviously Bensusan's favourites: Solomon Woodpecker, farm labourer and rural philosopher (especially when in his cups); the village 'wise woman', Mrs Wospottle; Martha Ram, motherly and dependable (though unqualified) nurse and midwife, with her deep-seated distrust of modern medicine (and especially of hospitals); Ephraim, the kindly carrier, who doubles on Sundays as elder and preacher among the 'Peculiar People'; the poacher James Blite, and so on. A host of other rural personalities make only occasional appearances, or even feature briefly in a single story; though one of the challenges to the indexer is the possibility that someone who on first acquaintance seems set to have no more than a walk-on part may later on develop into a significant figure in the ever-developing rural drama. Until I have arrived at the terminus, I shall never be sure.

As Hazel Bell has recently pointed out,¹ the greater complexity and richness of fictional narrative, as compared with biography or history, poses problems, especially in the devising of sub-headings for entries under the leading characters in Bensusan's world. For the most part, I have postponed the attempt to solve these problems until a later stage, but I know that they are not likely to go away. At present, I have contented myself with fuller, less astringent wording than would usually be admitted into a modern index. Is the style I have adopted unconsciously mirroring the nostalgic (though accurate) depiction of a bygone age in Bensusan's text by reverting to a Victorian prolixity; or am I properly and necessarily adapting the indexer's art to a quite different type of material? Perhaps both. Either way, I am for the moment working with entries like the following:†

† Note the use of abbreviated forms of the Marshland titles, in lieu of volume numbers, as part of my locators. Thus Idylls = Village Idylls (1926); Comment = Comment from the Countryside (1928); SW = At the Sign of the Wheatsheaf (1934); and DC = Dear Countryman (1931). Clearly, I am going to need an explanatory note, which will at least give my index a professional touch!

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 Temporal 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, 'Bolsheviks', 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

1. Bell, Hazel K. *Indexing biographies and other stories of human lives*. SI Occasional Papers, No.1, 1992, pp.3–4.

Dr John A. Vickers is retired Head of Religious and Social Studies at Bognor Regis College of Education. He won the Wheatley Medal for 1976, was a member of SI Council 1991–4, and is a member of The Indexer's Editorial Board.

Sign of The Times

'Without a good index, a newspaper dies daily. Samuel Palmer's *Index to The Times* from 1790 to 1905 is a standard reference tool, but more than 450 unaccumulated quarterly volumes, and the haphazardness of its headwords, make a hunt through its printed form laborious and frequently unsuccessful. Now that the index is on CD-ROM, the computer can dig out in a few seconds what might take months of page-turning.'

□ I agree with Bernard Levin that no self-respecting book should be complete without an index. It is not only a minor act of creation, but pretty well indispensable for any biography or social history. Yet such is the sloppiness of the publishing industry, indexes are rapidly going out of fashion. Among my favourite autobiographies, Alan Ross's *Coastwise Lights* and John Mortimer's *Clinging to the Wreckage* are both, inexcusably, index-less and the poorer for it.

—Kenneth Roy in *Scotland on Sunday*, 5 Sept 1993.