The Biglow papers

In the correspondence column of The Indexer 4 (3), Spring 1965, Karl Heumann of Bethesda, Maryland wrote of the index to The Biglow papers as one of 'the great examples of the deliberately humorous index'. We have obtained a copy of this work by the American poet and diplomat James Russell Lowell, published by George Routledge and Sons in 1886, 5.75" x 4", 384 pages (many of them uncut). It consists of satirical prose and verse of the period of the American war with Mexico and the American civil war, partly written in the Yankee dialect.

The 1886 edition has two series each of 11 papers (poems, purported letters and speeches), each preceded by a lengthy introduction and reviews (45/57 pages), followed by a five-page glossary and 35-page 'copious index' (so described on the title page).

As a sample of the glossary we quote from the section under W:

Wannut, walnut (hickory).
Ware, where.
Ware, were.
Whopper, *an uncommonly large lie*; as, that General Taylor is in favour of the Wilmot Proviso.
Wig, Whig; a party now dissolved.
Wunt, *will not*.
Wus, worse.
Wut, what.
Wuth, *worth*; as Antislavery perfessions 'fore 'lection ain't wuth a Bungtown copper.
Wuz, was, sometimes were.

There follow some extracts from the index:

Babel, probably the first Congress, 82—a gabble-mill, ib.
Bagowind, Hon. Mr., whether to be damned, 89
Birch, virtue of, in instilling certain of the dead languages, 114
Bird of our country sings hosanna, 57
Blind, to go it, 112
Blitz pulls ribbon from his mouth, 57
Bluenose potatoes, smell of, eagerly desired, 58
Bobtail obtains a cardinal's hat, 64
Bonaparte, N., a usurper, 103
Bonds, Confederate, their specie-basis cutlery, 207—when payable, (attention, British stockholders!) 268
Boston, people of, supposed educated, 59, *note*—has a good opinion of itself, 226
Brahmins, navel-contemplating, 97
Brains, poor substitute for, 227
Brigadiers, nursing ones. tendency in, to literary composition, 200
Buffaloes, herd of, probable influence of tracts upon, 303
Bung, the eternal, thought to be loose, 51
Butter in Irish bogs, 114
Dreams, something about, 293
Earth, Dame, a peep at her housekeeping, 84
Eyelids, a divine shield against authors, 83
Ezekiel would make a poor figure at a caucus, 286
Gabriel, his last trump, its pressing nature, 280
Geese, how infallibly to make swans of, 227
Ham, sandwich, an orthodox (but peculiar) one, 89—his seed, 248—their privilege in the Bible, ib.—immoral justification of, 249
Hell, the opinion of some concerning, 292—breaks loose, 303
Hotels, big ones, humbugs, 234
Jeremiah hardly the best guide in modern politics, 286
Journals, British, their brutal tone, 217
Lost arts, one sorrowfully added to list of, 130
Mill, Stuart, his low ideas, 269
Russell, Earl, is good enough to expound our Constitution for us, 218
Shakespeare, 321, a good reporter, 73
Shaking fever, considered as an employment, 109
Sheep, none of Rev. Mr. Wilbur's turned wolves, 54
Shot at sight, privilege of being, 253
Slaughtering nowadays is slaughtering, 117
Store, cheap cash, a wicked fraud, 115, 11
Sunday should mind its own business, 283
Tweedledee, gospel according to, 91
Tweedledum, great principles of, 91
Victoria, Queen, her terror, 80—her best carpets, 266
Wales, Prince of, calls brother Jonathan consanguineus noster, 220—but had not, apparently, consulted the Garter King at Arms, 221
Walton, punctilious in his intercourse with fishes, 63
We, 290, 291
Wooden leg, remarkable for sobriety, 106—never eats pudding, 107

Some items may give offence to modern eyes. Can they be held examples of improper bias in indexing, when they faithfully reflect the deliberately sardonic
parodies of the text? We quote some such below, with apologies, each entry followed by the lines of text to which it refers.

Bible, not composed for use of coloured persons, 248

(Ain't it belittlin' the Good Book in all it's proudes' features
  To think 'twuz wrote for black an' brown an' lasses-coloured creaturs?)

Coloured folks, curious national diversion of kick ing, 60

(I'd an idee that they were built after the darkie fashion all,
  An' kickin' colored folks about, you know, 's a kind o' national)

Coon, old, pleasure in skinning, 86

("Yes," sez Davis o' Miss.,
  "The perfection o' bliss,
  Is in skinnin' the same old coon," sez he.)

Mexicans charged with various breaches of etiquette, 60—kind feelings beaten into them, 94

(The Mex'cans don't fight fair, they say, they pis'n all the water,
  An' du amazin' lots of things thot isn't wut they ough' to)

(I du believe wutever trash
  'Il keep the people in blindness,—
  Thot we the Mexicuns can thrash
  Right into brotherly kindness)

Niggers, area of abusing, extended, 76—Mr. Sawin's opinion of, 125

(Ez fer Mexico, 'tain't no great glory to lick it,
  But 'twould be a darned shame to go pullin' o' triggers
  To extend the aree of abusin' the niggers.)

(Ez fer the niggers, I've ben South, an' that hez changed my min;
  A lazier, more ongrateful set, you couldn't nowers fin'.)

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Figs v. italics

Indexing of illustrations is a mess, and always has been. A glance through older books reveals that illustrations were usually not indexed, or occasionally a system of figure numbers or italics was used. With modern printing techniques, plates and line drawings can be dispersed evenly throughout the text, often resulting in more than one illustration per page. In the text, plates and line drawings tend to be numbered sequentially as figures, although some just have sequential numbers. Nevertheless, when it comes to indexing, publishers' house style and indexers seem to prefer to index figures and the captions of figures by the page number in italics; or maybe the figure number (not page) in italics; or perhaps in bold with tables in italics; or possibly figures and tables the same in italics; or maybe main page references in bold and figures in italics; and so on (and some still don't index illustrations!). Some helpfully put f or t as suffixes to indicate figure or table (while some early indexes use f or ff to denote following pages . . .). But who spares a thought for the researcher? Trying to find a particular reference in several books and having to read the 'instructions' to each and every index is too time-consuming for the average researcher who is likely to guess, often wrongly, what the symbolism means.

Computers have revolutionized the compilation of indexes in many respects, but it is still difficult to deal with figures other than by reference to page numbers. However, the real impact of computers on indexes has yet to be felt. With the increase of publishing on computer-read CDs, publishers are likely to become more resistant to the idea of an index—why bother to index when a computer can do a word-search in seconds? Researchers (and indexers?) know only too well the limitations of using word-search on computer files of data, but when have publishers ever put what is needed before what will turn a quick profit? The problem of how to indicate figure numbers in an index is a symptom of a general lack of standardization that makes indexes difficult to use. Unless more attention is paid to making indexes more 'user-friendly', indexes (whether on CD or paper) will rapidly lose ground to inadequate, but easier-to-use, methods of information retrieval.

Lesley and Roy Adkins

Indexing electronic journals

ISI, the Institute for Scientific Information, is to index a series of electronic journals for coverage in its database. The first will be The Online Journal of Knowledge Synthesis for Nursing, launched in 1993, which has no printed counterpart. It is available through OCLC's Electronic Journals Online service, and full text of its articles will be provided by ISI's document delivery service, the Genuine Article.

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